Five Things Vox Machina Learned About Percy, and One Thing Vex’ahlia Suspects He Doesn’t Know Himself

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Five Things Vox Machina Learned About Percy, and One Thing Vex'ahlia Suspects He Doesn't Know Himself

by Nenia458

Summary

There was reticent, and then there was Percy. The man kept his cards so close to his chest that he might as well be storing them tucked in between the lobes of his lungs. But the members of Vox Machina are more observant than most people would assume on first impression - they had to be, in their line of work. While they might not be as clever as some (looking at you, de Rolo), they aren't stupid either. They can add two and two together and get a pretty good idea of the backstory Percy isn't talking about.

What it says on the tin and in the tags, plus ART in every chapter :)

Chapter 1: Intro

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were things you learned about a person while living on the road together. It was impossible to keep secrets for long in such close quarters. Percy was better at hiding things than most, but still, the truth will out.

Some things were obvious within a few moments. The man may be poor now, but he'd come from *wealth.* It was in the way he spoke, using words with more syllables than anyone but those privately trained in elocution could comfortably pronounce. It was in the elegant twist of his wrist as he gestured, the proud tilt of his head that signaled that he *knew* his words would be listened to and obeyed. It was in the fine fabric of cravat, in the regal designs carved into his gold buttons, in his perfectly tailored coat, in his perpetually-gloved hands. It was in his utter disregard for money, and his cluelessness about how much anything was actually worth.

They were soon forced to recognize that Percy was clever. Brilliant, really. Vocabulary could be trained, but it was what he *said* that belied a sharp mind. Not many people could talk Scanlan or Vex into a verbal corner, yet on one memorable occasion he took on both simultaneously *and won*. There didn't seem to be a technical topic under the sun (including the sun) that he wasn't comfortable talking about. For hours. (Social ineptitude seemed to be an unavoidable consequence of genius.) And he didn't just talk about what he knew. He *applied* it. His pepperbox was just the most explosive example. There didn't seem to be any problem, from delicate repair work to battlefield tactics to politicking local law enforcement, that he couldn't solve within a few hours.

It was, sadly, blindingly apparent that Something Bad had happened to Percy. That Something made him fall from the grace of nobility and academia into the ignoble life of an adventurer. It made him skittish while he was awake and restless when he tried to sleep. It made him seemingly unable to trust even his friends, a social wound that spoke of a betrayal that had cut deep and scarred badly.

Other things were not so obvious.

Chapter End Notes

Here's my first attempt at a multi-chapter fic. My first and best and biggest fan, my dearest sister, has let me post her cut paper illustrations!!! Having art on one of my stories is seriously a bucket list dream come true, and I'm over the moon. She's awesome and her art is awesome so give her some love in the comments.

Chapter 2: Pike - Week 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pike learned that Percy had a… *complicated* relationship with faith.

It was the morning after they'd gotten the phylactery out of Grog. They were staying with Papap Wilhand, of course. Getting everyone sorted while drunk and exhausted had been an exercise in patience on Papap's part, but they'd all found a place eventually. Keyleth bunked with Pike in her old room. Grog shared with the twins since they didn't mind sharing a bed and he didn't mind sleeping on the floor. Papap ended up with Scanlan (and wasn't that going to be the source of hilarity sooner or later - the real question was who was going to mortally embarrass the other first, and Pike *couldn't wait*).

Percy took the couch in the living room. It was far too short for him, but it was that or the floor. The human thanked Papap with more graciousness than the situation really warranted, in Pike's opinion, but then again a couch and a homemade quilt in front of a toasty fireplace would be fantastic compared to the bare stone he'd been sleeping on in that drafty prison.

Despite her best intentions of sleeping in, Pike was up at dawn. Keyleth was already awake and outside, which was typical for her. Papap would probably appreciate her attention in the garden. There was no point in trying to get back to sleep, so Pike made her way downstairs - *quietly*, as to not disturb the others - and was surprised to find Percy already awake and blowing on a cup of coffee. The kitchen had two tiers - one gnome-height and one goliath sized. That meant that the shorter counter was about the height of the human's knees and the taller one was at mid-chest. The cutlery wasn't the right size for humans either - it was all too big or too small. Pike's mugs would be little more than shot glasses. Percy had opted to go large and was currently using one of Grog's mugs. The chunky pottery was almost the size of his head. His white hair stuck up every which way, making the whole ensemble quite hilarious.

He startled, quite badly, when she started laughing. The coffee went flying, the mug dropping directly onto the arch of Percy's stockinged foot. He yelped, but it was an odd sound, like he'd swallowed it halfway into voicing it properly. Within a moment, his back was to the cabinets, his bad foot raised slightly and his scalded hands held in front of him like a shield. His eyes were wide, roving, searching for something to focus on without the aid of the thick glasses glinting ineffectually from the countertop.

Pike had seen this before, in veteran adventurers who came to Sarenrae's temple searching for peace or in youths who'd just seen their villages razed to the ground. But never in a nobleman. (Despite the current state of his clothing and the recent state of his lodgings, Percy clearly wasn't a commoner.)

"You're safe," she held out her own hands, palms up, parallel to the ground. She knew people assumed that because she was small she wasn't a threat. She knew how to use that to her advantage both on and off the battlefield. "You're among friends. I'm sorry to have startled you."

"Ah." His arms lowered even as an embarrassed flush rose in his pale cheeks. "Apologies then for my break in composure. And the mess."

“It’s nothing,” Pike shrugged. It really was. Grog would do far worse when he came down for his usual breakfast. “Papap’s got a bespelled mop, I’ll go fetch it in a second. But first, let me take a look at your hands.”

He held them out, clearly more out of confused curiosity than anything else. Blisters were already starting to rise on his long fingers. It had to hurt like hell, though he barely even winced at her inspection. This close, she could see a *lot* of scars dotting his hands. Several of his fingernails had grown in crooked and warped - Pike had only seen that happen after a fingernail had been removed and healed without magic. Usually, that was because of a bad crushing accident, but there were other, darker, causes too. Ones that would match the thin white scars in the webbing between his fingers. And the neat line of perfectly round burn scars across the meat of his thumb that didn’t match the more chaotic splatters likely caused by later mechanical or laboratory accidents. And the older marks of manacles around his wrists that didn’t line up exactly with the chafing she’d healed a few days previously. And, of course, his outsized startle response.

Torture wasn’t as rare in Tal’Dorei as Pike would like, and it made her *furious*.

That wasn’t important right now, though. Pike put her rumination aside to focus on pushing some of Sarenrae’s healing into Percy. *These* marks wouldn’t scar, not if she had any say in the matter.

When she opened her eyes, Percy was *staring* at her with an odd sort of look on his face. She didn’t know him well enough to parse what exactly he meant by it.

“Thank you,” he flexed his hands and rolled his ankle experimentally. He seemed pleased with the results. Of course he was. Pike was *good* at healing spells. Sarenrae’s magic was particularly well-suited for it, and Grog had ensured she had *lots* of practice growing up.

Then Percy looked at his shirt front and winced. With a start, Pike realized he was wearing the same clothes he’d had on in prison. Several long, hard, days ago. Of course he was. He didn’t have any others, and they hadn’t bothered to get him any in the rush to save Grog’s life.

As if in answer to her half-formed thoughts, a dark green undershirt sailed over her head. Percy caught it on reflex.

“Thought you might need this,” Vax said with a laugh. “Keep it - it doesn’t fit me right across the shoulders, and it doesn’t fit Vex right across the chest. That’s what you get for using the cheapest tailor in town, I suppose.”

Just as soon as he appeared, Vax was gone. That seemed to be the rogue’s usual way of interacting with people, so Pike didn’t think much of it. Percy, on the other hand, looked even more discombobulated than before.

“I was going to grab a bite to eat, then head up to the temple. Wanna come with?”

Instead of calming him down, the mention of religion made him tense up even worse. “I’d rather not, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Bad experiences with the gods?” she guessed as she got out the mop and triggered the charm. It got to work, swirling about and wiping away the coffee on the floor. She didn’t know what Papap paid for that mop, but it had definitely paid for itself a hundred times over, in her opinion.

Percy's pinched look grew even tighter. “You could say that.”

It wasn’t that uncommon to come across people cursed in some way by deities, really. Lots of gods were spiteful, or liked playing tricks. Sarenrae was one of the truly benevolent ones, and Pike could not be more grateful to be in her service.

Pushing an issue never made anyone more likely to talk about it, so Pike left it at that and worked on making some oatmeal. Percy helped her get the big stewpot down from the upper shelf so she could make enough for Grog and the rest. It was almost as large as she was. Percy looked on with interest, though he acted skittish when she offered to have him help. Not a cook then. Drat. Their adventuring party could use someone who actually knew how to make cheap food taste vaguely edible. By the time they were done, the others had woken up (or at least had staggered downstairs).

Papap gave thanks over the food, as was their tradition. Grog muttered along with the dogged determination of someone repeating something in a foreign language by rote, though Pike knew he spoke from the heart. Vex kept her eyes open and ears up, keeping watch over the others in the vulnerable moment. Vax seemed sincere in his participation, which surprised Pike more than it probably should. Scanlan looked vaguely guilty, which was an odd look on the normally shameless gnome. Keyleth paid rapt attention to every detail, as eager to learn this as she did everything else.

Percy looked like he was about to be ill. Or cry. It was hard to tell.

The half-constipated half-nauseous look on his face didn’t ease as the meal progressed, either. Only Keyleth was a proper morning person, but Vex and Vax were soon bickering as only siblings could. Scanlan kept urging Grog to stuff yet another boiled egg in his mouth. He was up to six - his record was eleven (He’d choked on the twelfth, and luckily Pike had been there to push magical air back into his lungs so he didn’t die of it). Papap struck up a conversation with Keyleth about the finer points of tomato breeding. Soon only Pike and Percy weren’t debating about something. She asked after his health - she honestly didn’t think there would be anything physically wrong with him after her earlier healing, but it never hurt to check. He waved her off with a few pleasantries.

So it was *that* kind of wound, then.

“I suppose it’s just been quite some time since I’ve given thanks,” Percy offered after a long moment. He was very pointedly not meeting her inquisitive gaze. “There hasn’t been much of an opportunity to, really. I didn’t realize how much I’ve missed the *ritual* of it all. It’s a comfort, knowing what comes next, what’s expected of you, knowing that you’re with people of a like mind. I didn’t expect… well. The realization was something of a shock. I’m fine, I assure you.”

Pike got the impression that it had been a long time since Percy had felt anything approaching comfort, or companionship, or even *had* anything to be particularly grateful about, but Percy didn't explain further and Pike didn't wish to pry. Soon breakfast was done and the rest of Vox Machina vanished to do their own errands.

Percy cleared the table and started wiping down the dishes in the sink without being asked. Huh. Not something she'd expected from a toff. Pike noted how his eyes kept straying through the window. Pike knew there was a small shrine in the garden dead ahead. It was absolutely hideous, but Papap kept it covered in flowers anyway. Maybe *because* it was absolutely hideous.

"Grog and I built that, back when we were younger," she offered. "I was taking some formal chapel classes - we had been focusing on the importance of shrines. Papap had just finished building Grog's room, so there were some extra building materials around. I can honestly say that we did our enthusiastic best."

"It's… distinctive."

"It's *awful*. We knew it was bad even before we finished it, but Papap wouldn't hear of us taking it back down. So now we get to look at that pile of misshapen rocks covered with a lopsided shack until Sarenrae takes mercy on us and sends a bolt of lightning to destroy it."

Percy laughed. He was out of practice, but it was genuine.

"I wasn't always religious, you know," she said carefully as she dried the dishes. His gaze *snapped* to her. It was a bit uncomfortable, actually, being the subject of such intense scrutiny. The magnification of the glasses certainly didn't help.

"Oh?"

"My birth family were all, well, thieves. Criminals. Treated me awful, though I didn't realize that at the time. It was just the way things were, you know?"

He didn't, that much was clear, but he still nodded.

"Papap rescued me. He taught me about Sarenrae, and she taught me how to interact with people in a way that brought healing and not brokenness. She saved me just as much as Papap did, really. And then together we saved Grog. I wouldn't have a family if it weren't for Papap's faith."

"I'm glad things worked out for you. My experience with religion is almost the exact opposite."

Pike waited. He didn't say anything more. She didn't press. They were still relative strangers, after all, and religious trauma was a delicate subject even among friends. If her cleric training had taught her anything, it was that people would come to her when they were ready. They couldn't accept healing until they *wanted* to be better.

"I'll walk you over to the tailor's if you'd like," she offered instead. "It's on my way."

Percy nodded eagerly. Vax's (or was it Vex's? More often than not, the distinction was superfluous) green shirt didn't fit him either, and the color clashed horribly with his blue coat.

"You didn't seem surprised or offended at my lack of faith," he observed once they were on their way. The streets of Westruun were already busy with vendors hawking their wares and tradespeople heading to work. Pike appreciated Percy's height and bearing - despite his filthy clothing, the crowds parted for him easily without much effort on their part. "I did not expect that of a cleric."

"I worship Sarenrae," Pike said. "Being nonjudgemental is kinda her thing."

"Interesting." He stared off into the middle distance for a moment before turning back to her. "I admit that my education is severely lacking in respect to the greater pantheon."

Now *that* was an opening if Pike had ever seen one.

"What *did* your religious education cover?"

"Our local gods, almost exclusively. My family…" he stopped. Swallowed. Adjusted his cravat. Nervous ticks, though more refined than most people's, which was to be expected of someone with an accent like his. "Well. My family was *incredibly* involved with our local temple."

Pike made note of Percy's uncomfortableness, as well as the use of past tense. As well as what he'd said earlier about his religious journey. Opposite of hers, so he'd had a family, and faith, but then tragedy had struck. He'd be in good company with Vox Machina - of all their parents and guardians, only Papap was alive and in good graces with his (great great grand) children.

"Not that it did us any good," Percy added under his breath. If Pike hadn't been a gnome, and a gnome with particularly good hearing at that, she would have never heard his words over the hustle and bustle of the street. She fought to keep her face neutral even though her heart broke. Poor kid. The world had clearly not been kind to him. She resolved to do better.

Percy spoke aloud to her again. "You know, I think your arrival the other day was the first time my prayers have been answered?" His laugh was a dry, bitter thing, made of gall and tombstones. He looked upwards, seeming to enjoy the warmth on his too-pale face. Pike wondered just how long he'd been locked in prison, away from the sun. Too long, judging by how pale he was and how thin his manacle-chafed wrists had been. Still were. He'd not eaten much for breakfast.

Pike also wondered what that would be like, living a life without the surety of knowing that if you needed help, your calls would be answered. Sarenrae had been such an integral part of her existence ever since Papap took her in - she couldn't remember what it was like without that glowing warmth coiled near her soul. How cold and lonely must that be? She stepped a little closer to Percy's side.

“I’m curious, though,” he said, “if there’s a trick to it I’ve been missing. Sarenrae seems happy to appease your every request, be it a spectral sword to fight a nightmare or healing for a clumsy stranger.”

“No trick,” Pike shrugged. “I’m more limited by *me*, honestly. She’s always willing to help, but I can’t control that much power very often or for very long. If I tried, her divinity would consume me utterly, and there wouldn’t be anything of *me* left.”

“Like a filament in a bulb,” Percy muttered to himself, though loud enough this time to make it obvious he didn’t mind being overheard. Pike had heard of bulbs, but only in the context of gardening, and filaments only in the context of weaving. But never together. Perhaps it made more sense to Percy - he seemed like someone who would know esoteric applications for common things. “Fascinating. But it’s not controlled by your intent, or reliant on your faith that Sarenrae will assist?”

“I mean, my will is important, obviously. It takes focus to shape power - that’s true of any magic. And if I try to use her power for something wrong, then she has the right to restrict my access to it, as she should. But faith? I dunno, Percy. Is it faith to know that the sun will rise in the morning? Sarenrae has always been there for me.”

His expression twisted and writhed. “*So I just wasn’t strong enough,”* Percy whispered to himself. If Pike hadn’t been practicing lip-reading with Vex, she wouldn’t have caught that either. She knew from other experiences with nobles that they were also usually much better at hiding their thoughts than this. She revised her theory on how long he’d been alone from *too long* to *way too damn long*.

Pike immediately took his hand and made him *stop* right there in the middle of the road. He seemed surprised and tried to jerk away, but Pike held firm. She routinely got Grog to pay attention this way, whether he wanted to or not, and Percy was no Grog in the strength department. She looked him dead in the eye. Percy was much younger than he looked, she realized. Young and scared and lonely and traumatized, and yet putting up a passible facade of a much older aristocrat.

She didn’t have time for any of that bullshit. There was a time for patience and there was a time for direct and immediate confrontation.

“Your god wasn’t strong enough,” Pike said with conviction. “If you prayed in good faith, and your prayers weren’t answered, it wasn’t because of *you*. Percy, please listen to me. Whatever terrible thing happened to you, *it was not your fault.* That blame lies with whoever did it.”

“And if my god saw fit to ignore my pleas, does that not make him culpable too?” Percy hissed. Pike noted that he didn’t deny that *something terrible* had happened to him. The intensity of his words was made more ominous by a cloud passing overhead that threw him into shadow. The lighting made his pale eyes look almost black. She smelled smoke, though that was probably from the barbeque vendor a few stalls down. Regardless, it took more will than she expected in order to stand her ground in the face of Percy’s fury.

Pike knew what the theologians had to say about what they dubbed the Problem of Pain. But she had a feeling that Percy not only knew those arguments, but had no time nor patience for them. If his hands and trauma responses were anything to go by, his pain wasn't an abstraction - it was seared into his flesh, into his soul.

"Terrible things happen every day, to good and faithful people who don't deserve it as well as evil monsters who probably do. Is it good or right or fair? No. *Fuck* no. But that's just how it is. Asking for help from the gods is no guarantee you'll receive it. Sometimes they are stretched too thin - their power in this realm is limited since the Calamity. Sometimes they aren't paying attention. Sometimes they pick favorites. Sometimes they shirk their duties. Sometimes they just plain fuck up. They aren't infallible, and they aren't logical. Does that make the gods responsible for all the awful things in the world? I don't know. But what I *do* know is that it's up to us, as people, to bridge the gap. To answer others' prayers when the gods are silent."

Percy stared at her, almost the same way he'd stared at her that morning in the kitchen after she'd healed his hand. She didn't have any better idea on how to interpret that look now as she did then.

"I don't want your pity," he said. He tried for a haughty tone, but it fell a little flat.

"It's not pity, it's compassion," she corrected. "You were hurt, and that was wrong. But you aren't alone anymore, yeah? If you ask for our help, to the best of our ability, we'll give it."

"What if I can't be helped? What if I'm a coward, and a fool, and a terrible person who's done awful things?"

Despite his vitriol, there was something vulnerable and shivering under his words. This was something that he believed to be true about himself. But people were often their own harshest critic. Pike was a fair judge of character. She'd seen how he'd stepped up to help save Grog. Not many people would have done that.

"Like Sarenrae, I believe in second chances," she said, meeting his challenge with gentleness. "And third, and fourth, and chances beyond that. No one is beyond help, if they're willing to receive it."

He didn't believe her, that much was obvious. That was alright - they'd known each other for less than half a week. He would learn. It would just take some time.

Pike lightened her tone and loosened her grip. "The tailor is right over there," she nodded over his shoulder. "And there's a park just around the corner. Quiet and green - it's just outside the old folk's home so they can watch the birds. Where would you like to go?"

He glanced at the park with something like wistfulness in his gaze. Notably, he did not pull away from her grasp, despite now having the ability to do so.

"Tailor first. I want to be able to burn these clothes as soon as possible," he grimaced as he flipped the hem of his threadbare coat. "Vax's generosity notwithstanding, whatever this shirt is made of itches like a curse."

“That’s probably because it *is* cursed. I wouldn’t put it past him to sprinkle it with itching powder,” Pike smirked. “He’s a trickster, I should have warned you.”

“Lesson learned,” Percy said ruefully. Gently, he pulled away. Pike let him. “I seem to be saying this a lot recently, but I truly mean it. *Thank you*. I will think about your words. I can’t say I’ll ever agree with them, but…”

“That’s all I ask,” Pike interrupted. “It’s ok, you know. Whatever you do or don’t believe. As long as you know you aren’t alone in the world.”

“As you say,” he tipped his head in a half-bow and then turned with a swirl of ruined navy coat.

That night, Percy returned to Papap’s house wearing a new set of clothes that were practically identical to the old ones, albeit in *much* better repair. He didn’t say much, but handed Pike a small package. Inside was a small bundle of incense and a handmade tray to burn it in. There weren’t any obvious religious symbols carved into the wood, but its purpose for worship was clear. It was fine work - sanded so smooth that it didn’t even need varnish.

The attached note was in an elegant script that could only be Percy’s.

Personally, I’m of the opinion that the gods view me with utter indifference, at best, and I’m inclined to give them the same courtesy. However, I would be remiss in not expressing some form of gratitude for my deliverance from that prison and the much-improved circumstances in which I now find myself. You can take the credit or share it as you see fit. After all, you seem to have faith enough for both of us, in gods and in people.

Chapter End Notes

If Percy seems a bit OOC, it’s because: “I, for a brief time, thought that I had died within that prison and I was having a fever dream from starvation and this was what that felt like, was my mind making stories of friends and adventures and these things I would never do because I was a coward and fool. I miss my family so much and I've done some terrible things.” If nothing is real, there’s no reason for him not to be honest with figment-of-his-imagination-Pike.

While I’ve personally been deconstructing my faith for almost ten years now, my best friend is a pastor and a genuinely good person. She reminds me so much of Pike it’s not even funny. (I'm actually in the process of making her a Pike cosplay for an event.) I struggled to write this chapter until I started speaking with her voice. That said, the theological opinions in this story are of my own devising and don’t necessarily reflect her beliefs.

I think it’s really interesting that the de Rolos have a personal connection to the Dawnfather that stretches back thousands of years, yet he was conspicuously absent

during the Briarwood takeover. He chooses and blesses Vex, not Percy. These inconsistencies aren't really explored in the show, but they absolutely fascinate me.

Comments are love and are cherished more than you know. Many thanks for reading!

Chapter 3: Vax - Week 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vax learned that Percy knew his way around fish.

They'd made camp for the night by a decently sized stream. Trinket had already waded into the middle, splashing about and generally making a huge mess. Vax dug around the Bag of Holding for some hooks while Grog tied some string to some appropriately-sized sticks. After the goliath was done, Percy took the ball of twine and started messing around with it. He was still messing around with it almost an hour later, when Vax and Grog returned with two fish each.

"Whatcha got there?"

The ponce tucked it away quickly, but Vax still saw.

"Is that *lace*? Are you crocheting? Hidden depths indeed…"

"It's a *net*, and stop… insinuating. I'm almost done."

"I was insinuating nothing," Vax said honestly. "Lace is tricky stuff. It takes a lot of skill to do it right. That's part of why it's so dang expensive. Don't let my sister know: she'll have you turned into a cash cow before you can blink."

"Oh." Percy blinked. It always seemed to surprise him that Vax was a staunch feminist. (Of course he was, his twin sister was *Vex*. Also, he wasn't an idiot, despite popular belief.) A skill was a skill. Usefulness didn't have a gender. Or creativity, for that matter. Damn snobby nobles and their bullshit 'spheres of influence'. Percy had never been an outright misogynist (he would be *very* dead if he was) but sometimes it came across that way due to the traditionalist chivalry bred into his bones.

The gunslinger straightened up with a remarkably large (considering the time and materials he had to work with) net held up between his outstretched arms. It seemed to meet his inspection, albeit barely, judging from the displeased curl of his lips. Nevertheless, ten minutes later he returned from the river with the net slung over his shoulder like a sack.

It was absolutely filled with fish. The good kind too, not the bottom feeders that they'd caught earlier.

"I didn't know how many we needed," Percy said somewhat sheepishly. "I figured we could smoke or salt the extras, maybe sell them the next time we're in town."

"Darling, you spoil us!" Vex blew him a kiss. Percy turned tomato-red and clutched his sack of fish like a lifeline. Vax narrowed his eyes. The human saw the look, visibly gulped, then took a pointed step backward. Good. Vax liked the guy, he did, but they'd not been traveling together for very long. He didn't trust easily, and he valued his sister above all things. If Percy was half as smart as he seemed to think he was, he'd behave himself.

Percy found an out-of-the-way corner, pulled out a knife, and started cleaning his catch. The offal he tossed to an incredibly happy Trinket. Though absolutely soaked (and reeking of pond-slime-wet-fur) the bear had caught nothing so far.

Vax blinked. Then he blinked again.

He *knew* he was good with knives. It was something he'd worked hard on, and something he was proud of. First it had been a hobby to annoy his mother, then a matter of pride to shut up the bullies of Syngorn, then an issue of survival as he tried to keep himself and (more importantly) his sister alive, and now it was something he deeply enjoyed. Grog mocked him constantly for having such tiny blades, but they killed his opponents just as dead as the goliath's massive axe. They just took a little more finesse to wield effectively. Finesse that Vax had earned through years of sweat and blood and tears.

Vax sat down next to Percy and picked up a fish. He cleaned it as fast as he could, and only nicked himself once in doing so. Somehow, the white-haired human had managed to finish two fish in that time, and far more neatly.

"De Rolo," Vax said flatly, "What the actual fuck."

Percy stared at Vax like *he* was the one behaving strangely. His hands didn't even slow, despite the fact that he wasn't really watching what he was doing.

"These are smaller than I'm used to, so I'm a bit slow, sorry." Percy finished off the fish he was filleting, then scraped his knife against a whetstone with a few businesslike strokes.

A bit *slow*? How fast had he been when he was in his element? And where had that been? Muscle memory of that caliber took *time* to develop. Vax would know. Had Percy come from a fishing family? Worked at a fishmongers? Neither theory seemed to fit with his accent and his attitude.

"May I?" Vax held out a hand. You could tell a lot about a person about their knife and how they sharpened it, assuming you knew what you were about. Which Vax did. There was a sort of beauty to a well-crafted knife, and a beauty in watching it wielded well. To Vax's critical eye, the way Percy moved his knife through flesh, parting skin and teasing out bones, was nothing short of art. That alone told him plenty, but he wanted to know more. Percy handed his blade over.

The first thing Vax noticed was that it was *sharp*. Sharper than he kept his own daggers, though that made sense. He had to routinely stab through leather and metal and hide - an edge as fine as this would shatter under that sort of abuse. It took a steady hand to get a consistent edge on this kind of curved blade, and a particular type of metal construction to keep it. A single alloy wouldn't do. Percy's knife had a hard but brittle core sandwiched between softer but more flexible sides. When sharpened correctly, just enough of the hard edge would be revealed to cut, but not so much that it would be subject to enough strain to chip. The more flexible outer alloy would take the brunt of the abuse. It wasn't exactly easy to forge a knife like that, though the benefits were numerous.

The second thing he noticed was the elegant etching along the blunt edge. Vax wasn't familiar with the intricate looping script, which was odd enough in itself. Syngorn had been awful, but his education had been thorough enough. When he paid attention, at least. He didn't sense any magic in the metal, so it was unlikely to be charmed. In any case, it was pretty. It was always nice to see someone add a bit of flair to their work. Just because it wasn't necessary for function didn't mean it wasn't necessary for the user's enjoyment.

The third thing Vax noticed was that despite the excellent quality of the blade, the handle was rather battered. The wood was chipped and cracked in places, though someone had done a good job of repairing the damage. There were two distinct wear patterns - the older one was for a much larger hand than Percy's. Second-hand, then. Possibly a gift with sentimental value. Interesting.

"Where did you get this? It's good work."

Percy hesitated for a moment before answering. "I made it. Well, repaired it."

"Really." He raised an eyebrow.

"Really." The human matched Vax's deadpan tone. "You already know I forged my pepperbox - surely a simple knife is more believable."

Vax supposed that was fair, though the knife in his hands was far from 'simple'. Mostly he didn't know the first thing about Percy's strange weapon, and had never gotten close enough to inspect its workmanship. Or rather, Percy would not let anyone get within arm's reach of the thing, under implied threat of shooting them with it if they tried.

"What does it say?" he asked as he handed the knife back.

"The name of the knife's previous owner," Percy said somewhat reluctantly. He turned back to cleaning fish with an intensity that made it clear he was not open to further questioning.

Vax didn't take offense. The knife had already shared all he wanted to know. Namely, Percy was a sentimental fellow, an artist, and a skilled blacksmith. He knew how to use and maintain his tools. He took pride in his work, and took the time to add beauty even to the most brutal of implements. And, as demonstrated by the fact that he had not only caught but was cleaning his dinner without direction or complaint, the former nobleman wasn't afraid of hard work or of getting his hands dirty.

Vax decided that while he might not *trust* de Rolo quite yet, he could find it in his heart to *respect* him. Which meant he needed a proper nickname. Nicknames were a good way of taking people down a peg - and he needed to find one sooner rather than later since he was uncomfortably close to hero worship of the fucking git as it was.

What was his middle name again? Those were always good places to start. The first one was Frederickson. Frederickstein? Something like that. Fred-something-or-other. Whatever.

'Freddie' had a nice ring to it.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter this week. I originally wrote what later became “The Cut of His Jib” for this spot, but that story quickly spiraled into its own thing that no longer really fit here. So feel free to read that story if you’d like some more exploration of Vax learning about Percy and being generally irked about the whole process.

If you can’t tell, I absolutely adore the scrap of backstory Taliesin threw in there about Percy being a fisherman for a bit. My contribution to the headcannon is that the captain that rescued him gave Percy that knife during the ‘be careful about going into the revenge business, boy’ conversation.

I don’t think anyone really appreciates how incredible it is that Percy forged a workable pepperbox. The knowledge of material science as well as the forging skill required is absolutely insane for the medieval-ish setting he’s working in. There are reasons why it took hundreds of years of development for people to go from muzzle-loaded rifles to widespread handheld revolvers, and a large number of them had to do with the quality of steel available as well as the master-level craftsmen required to build them.

Comments are cherished like a dragon hoards gold. Many thanks.

Chapter 4: Grog - Week 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grog learned that Percy didn't like other people seeing him naked.

The last prank war had been a bit before they'd started working with Percy, and they'd been doing that for a while now, so Grog figured they were well overdue. He was excited: everyone knew Percy was clever, so he'd be a worthy opponent. Maybe he'd even help them successfully prank Vex. Vax could usually manage it, but it had to be a *good* prank for him to consider turning on his sister and risking her wrath.

Grog started in the traditional way, by pranking Pike. It was easy for him to shift her sleeping roll from its usual place to halfway up a tree. She always did sleep like the dead. When she woke up the next morning, he was there to catch her when she rolled off the branch, screaming like a banshee.

Pike got him back by switching out the ale in his for-special-occasions-only flask (not his keg, it didn't work that way, thank fuck) with apple juice. She did the same to Scanlan's port. And Vax's whiskey. And Vex's sealed bottle of brandy. Scanlan got her back by casting a spell that made her hair stand straight on end for an entire day. It was the silliest thing Grog had ever seen. Vax swapped his sister's blue feathers for yellow ones without her noticing. Her face when she found out hours later was hysterical.

Pretty soon, everyone was pranking everyone else. Except Percy. Somehow, he managed to escape Pike's initial alcohol prank and Vax's sew-your-spare-shirt-sleeves-together prank. He didn't even seem to notice Scanlan's ring-a-tinny-bell-every-17-minutes prank, even though it drove the half-elves absolutely insane. The moles Keyleth sent to burrow under everyone's bedrolls didn't cause him to lose any more sleep than he usually did.

But Grog had an Idea. It was a good one. Percy wouldn't be able to avoid it, and it would be hilarious. A fitting end to a rapidly-escalating prank war.

It hinged on the fact that Percy didn't take baths with anyone else around. Grog guessed it made sense: fancy people liked wearing far too many layers of clothes. Either fancy fabrics weren't any good at keeping the heat in, or nobles weren't very hot to begin with. Probably both. Percy only took baths when they were at a tavern, really. But they'd been squelching through a swamp for the last few days, and everyone was soaked in mud and blood. Their campsite was by a blessedly deep and clear stream, and everyone was looking forward to getting cleaned up. Grog didn't really mind the muck, honestly, but it had been a while since he'd gone for a swim and he *did* enjoy that. Close enough.

"I'll set up camp," Percy volunteered like he usually did in situations like this. The rest of Vox Machina stripped to their skins and proceeded to stage a splash war. Grog liked those. He always won. Scanlan tried to use his magic hand to dunk him underwater, and he let him because it gave him an excuse to dunk the gnome in return. Keyleth turned into an otter for a bit, and did tricks. She was very good. They laughed until they got water up their noses and then laughed some more to get it back out. When their fingers went all wrinkly, they all toweled off and pulled their spare clothes from their packs on the beach.

“Your turn!” Pike called to Percy. As usual, he didn’t make a move to start undressing until they’d all meandered back to main camp. Grog had Vax double back and steal Percy’s stuff. He would have done it himself, except he wasn’t very sneaky and Percy was very good at spotting even sneaky people despite (or maybe because) of his glasses. Besides, Vax was more than happy to help. He liked pranks just as much as Grog, and wanted to take Percy down a peg besides.

Then they waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Just when they were about to mount a search party, Percy came back. His face was set *hard,* like he was squaring off against an enemy in the middle of a fight. He didn’t look at any of them as he marched right into the middle of the camp and stood in the full light of the fire. He turned around slowly, his arms slightly outstretched, letting them see all sides. Then he marched directly over to where his things were, picked them up, and marched into the cover of the forest. If branches could slam like doors, they would have slammed as he brushed past.

“Oh Percy,” Keyleth sobbed behind the hand over her mouth.

“Fuck,” Scanlan swore.

“*Gods*,” Vax breathed.

“Well shit,” his sister agreed.

Pike stayed quiet. She wasn’t surprised, Grog realized. She’d known. That made sense - Pike knew lots of things other people didn’t because Sarenrae told her so.

“I don’t understand,” Grog said. It was a good prank. They’d all done it before to other members of the S.H.I.T.s. (Vox Machina, now, he supposed.) Everyone always laughed, made a few jokes, and moved on. But Percy hadn’t reacted like that. He’d reacted like people did when a prank had gone too far and hurt someone. But Grog was always very careful never to do pranks like that. Even Vax had thought it was a good idea, and he generally knew just how far to push people and no further.

“I know you don’t buddy,” Pike patted Grog’s elbow. “You’ve never had any problems with showing your body or your scars.”

“Why would I? There ain’t nothin’ to be ashamed of, ‘n’ a lot to be proud of. We all have bodies and scars.”

Pike sighed. “The kind of scars Percy has… they only come from having someone hurt you without you being able to fight back. Sometimes having other people see scars like that… it makes them hurt all over again.”

Grog didn’t like the sound of that. Not at all.

Vex was on watch. She said that Percy hadn't strayed far from the camp, and to leave him alone. But Grog didn't want to leave things as they were. He knew he was big, and his friends were relatively breakable (except Pike, because Pike was a monstah). He tried to be careful, all of the time. But sometimes he made mistakes. Papap Wilhand taught him that he needed to clean up his messes. So that was what he was going to do, and Vex (even though she was very scary when she got mad) couldn't stop him.

He found Percy sitting on a rock behind a screen of raspberry bushes. There was a little bitty opening in between the thorns, but Grog didn't see that until he was already halfway through forging his own path. He grabbed a few berries on his way through - it seemed like a fair trade for the blood the bushes were extracting.

Percy *had* to have heard him - Grog was being the exact opposite of sneaky. The gunslinger was wearing his coat, despite the warmth of the night. The silence around him felt like running into a stone wall. Luckily, Grog never had any issue doing that with literal walls, never mind metaphorical ones.

"I'm sorry," he said. And he was. The only people he ever wanted to hurt were the big bad ones, not little scrawny humans who somehow managed to save his life now and then.

Percy leapt to his feet, his muscles so tense that he was practically shaking. Grog kept a careful eye on the hand gripped around his fancy weapon. He'd been shot with it before, when he was possessed that one time, and it wasn't fun. But he could take it, if it came to that. Maybe the best way to fix the hurt he'd caused was to let Percy do a little hurting himself. But that didn't seem quite right.

Grog held out a palm full of raspberries. Percy stared at it like he didn't know what he was looking at.

"They're raspberries," Grog explained before popping one in his mouth. "Very tasty."

"I can see that," Percy rolled his eyes, then sat back down on his rock with his back turned. "To state the obvious: I wish to be left alone, Grog."

'Obvious' was one of those fancy words people liked to use when they were being stupid and were trying to hide it. Grog had no time for that, so he sat down on the ground beside Percy so that their heads were about the same height. Percy just sighed with his entire body, then sat ramrod-straight on his rock and refused to make eye contact. That was ok. He didn't need his eyes in order to listen.

"I was about your size when I almost died the first time," Grog said. He kept his hand held up so Percy could take a raspberry if he wanted. "The herd was gonna beat up this tiny old gnome. They said it was for the food, but we'd just eaten a few hours before and no one likes vegetables anyway. And even if he was carting some good steak or somethin', it woulda been a waste of everyone's time to beat him up. He was too old and small - wouldn't put up a fight worth havin'. But my uncle didn't like that when I pointed it out. He had the whole herd beat me up instead. I couldn't fight back, not really. It hurt. Not just the wounds, though they hurt real bad, but the fact that they was my herd. I thought I could trust 'em, you know?"

Percy sucked in a tight breath, then released it slow. “I do,” he whispered.

“Anyway, Pike saved me. She and Papap Wilhand let me stay with them, even though I was too big and kept breaking things. And now I’ve got a new herd, a better one.”

Delicately, Percy plucked a single raspberry from the pile. His eyebrows raised a moment after he popped it into his mouth.

“Tasty, eh?”

“Rather.” He reached for another.

“The way I see it, the bigger the scar, the harder you had to fight to survive it, yeah?” Grog said carefully. He had to use simple concepts with Percy. He tended to get all confused and tangled up with the complicated words he liked to use. That was why he took a big sigh before speaking, and often paused in the middle of his sentences. “Sometimes you come across somethin’ that’s bigger and badder than you, and you can’t beat it, and that’s ok. I was just a kid when my herd left me for dead. I’m not clever the same way you are, but I think you weren’t more than a kid when you got your scars either.”

Percy stiffened like he was getting ready to take a punch, then relaxed as if he were telling each individual muscle to stand down. His fingers shook a little when he reached for his next raspberry.

“Ain’t nothin’ to be ashamed about,” Grog hurried to reassure him. “We both got away, we got patched up, and now we’re stronger. If I met my herd today, I’d be able to give them a fight worth havin’. Not just because I’m bigger and stronger now than I was then. But because we have Vox Machina. We don’t have to fight alone no more. When’s something’s bigger and badder than you, the only way to win is to bring help and beat it together. That’s the whole point of having a herd to begin with, yeah? So you tell me who made all those scars, and I’ll smash them with you.”

Percy laughed, but not in a particularly happy way. “I know you would, Grog. But I hope you never meet. For your sake.”

His hand was empty, so Grog stood to pick some more raspberries. Percy was quiet for a long time. Grog understood. Sometimes you had to think a while to get the words to come out in the right order. Especially when you knew so many overly-fancy words like Percy did - it took time to sort through everything, or at least that’s what Grog assumed. He kept his personal word-collection small and simple. Made things easier and faster that way.

“My boots, my glasses, my coat, and my pepperbox are off-limits,” Percy said eventually. His words were even tighter and clipped than usual. “I need to have access to them at all times, for your safety as well as my own. Understood?”

Grog nodded. He knew about Rules. He wasn’t allowed to touch Pike’s holy symbol, or Vex’s bow, or Keyleth’s crown. He wasn’t allowed to trap Scanlan in small dark places either. But there were a *lot* of pranks he could pull that didn’t break any Rules.

“Gotcha. Pranks aren’t meant to hurt. I am very sorry this one did.”

Percy finally turned around and actually looked at him properly for the first time since they started talking. “I know,” he said, and his voice wasn’t quite so sharp as before.

“How about we take these berries back to the others? This isn’t a good place to sleep. Too prickly.”

This time, Percy’s laugh was a little happier. “I doubt I’ll sleep much tonight, but I’ll freely admit that this rock is deeply uncomfortable.”

The others were asleep by the time they returned back to camp. Grog put the berries in a bowl next to Keyleth - she’d share with the others in the morning. He dumped another log on the fire so it would keep burning.

“I’ll relieve Vex for the next watch,” Percy whispered so as not to bother the others. “Get some rest.”

The next morning, Grog’s tongue turned bright blue. So did Vax’s. It was hilarious and no one could figure out how Percy had done it (because a prank that clever *had* to have been Percy’s idea, despite his protestations of innocence) since they’d all eaten the same food and drunk from the same pitcher. Forgiveness through actions was always better than hollow words, in Grog’s opinion.

He just *knew* Percy would be a champion prankster.

Chapter End Notes

I think this was my favorite chapter to write, and not just because it’s the only one I didn’t have to redo from scratch more than once. Grog’s POV is so much fun. He’s far more philosophical in the livestream than the TV show, and he doesn’t get much credit for it in the livestream. It’s a shame. Wisdom often comes from a place of simplicity, of being able to differentiate what is important and what is not.
The relationship between Grog and Percy is so interesting to me. They have even less in common than Percy and Keyleth, and yet they vibe so well together. This story owes a lot to "The Language of Battle" by SETI_fan. IMO they absolutely nailed Grog's inner voice.
Cross my heart I drafted this before Season 2 came out - all similarities are purely coincidence. I know in the TV show Grog’s backstory is a secret from everyone, (including Pike, which makes absolutely no sense on a lot of levels, but I understand why they did it from a storytelling standpoint) but revealing it to Percy here was just too perfect of an opportunity to pass up.
Also: Percy came from a large family. He 100% has experience with pranks, aristocratic expectations notwithstanding. I will only listen to counterarguments to this headcannon from people with six or more siblings.

I'm blown away by the response to this story. Thanks for all the comments/kudos/bookmarks. You're the best.

Chapter 5: Percy - Week 3

Chapter Notes

This chapter wasn't meant to happen, but Percy Had Something He Wanted To Say™ because he has Trauma™, and when one of my muses holds a pepperbox to my head, who am I to argue? I'm putting this blurb here and not as a separate story because it doesn't really make much sense without the context of Grog's chapter. That, and it gave me an excuse to post my favorite art piece that my sister made.

Also, I promise I can add, despite the fact that this story is (currently) an 5+1=8.

Additional warnings: Anna Ripley, Sylas Briarwood, implied/referenced rape (it's vague enough you can read it another way), cannibalism (is it cannibalism if it's a vampire doing the eating?)
It's very brief, just a few sentences. If you don't want to read, skip the strikethrough text.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The beach was empty.

Percy's breath caught.

The beach was empty.

He quickly made his way back to the shore. Perhaps he was mistaken: his pack was brown like the bare earth of the riverbank. Maybe he just couldn't see it without his glasses. Maybe it had fallen behind something. Percy raced out of the water with more speed than grace. A closer inspection proved his worst fears: the beach *was* empty. His pack was gone. His glasses were gone. His boots were gone. His gun was gone. His coat and clothes were gone.

In other words - he couldn't see, couldn't run, couldn't fight.

He was vulnerable.

Percy put a hand on his racing heart, and willed his breaths to steady. This wasn't like Before. He'd scouted out this area himself less than an hour ago - it was safe from attack. He could hear the rest of Vox Machina laughing and chatting just through the treeline. He wasn't alone, not really. He trusted them to come if he called, as foolish as that trust might be. He was whole and hale. He wasn't bruised and broken and bleeding. He was free. He wasn't chained to a wall. He could see the sky. He wasn't in darkness. He was fine. He was safe. This wasn't like Before.

Percy didn't feel safe. Quite the opposite, in fact. He was terrified.

He was vulnerable, and vulnerability meant agony.

It took longer than it should for him to realize what had happened. Someone, likely Vax, had stolen away his belongings for a prank. Percy had avoided the escalating prank war started by Grog so far, but apparently no longer. This particular one was an old classic: Oliver and Whitney had done much the same to him and Julius once during a trip to the ocean one warm summer day. Their father had tried to fake indignation through his laughter - their mother didn't even try to hold back her giggles as she held Ludwig on her hip. Vesper had been the one kind enough to hand them towels, her eyes averted and a grin tugging at her lips. Cassandra had teased them about it for *weeks* afterward. It had likely been her original idea - the twins took the fall for more than one of her foolish pranks. Percy's throat went tight at the memory of better, more innocent times.

They're all dead now. Their corpses lie desecrated and unavenged. Their murderers walk free.

Percy's palm itched for his pepperbox. He clenched his hand reflexively, but it didn't help soothe the churning mess of emotions in his chest, or ease the yearning for his weapon. In fact, the reminder of what had happened the last time he'd been so utterly defenseless only

served to heighten his anxiety. He'd made his List for the express purpose of never feeling like this again. To never be helpless in the face of terror, or be terrified by his helplessness.

He was vulnerable, and vulnerability meant agony.

As he saw it, Percy only had two options: stay here in the river, freezing his bare ass off until someone came looking for him, or he could return to camp with nothing more than his aforementioned bare ass and confront Vox Machina directly. Neither was an appealing prospect. He rubbed his fingers against the scars littering his chest. No one had ever seen them. Not even Dr. Ripley - they'd still been raw and bloody when he'd escaped her clutches. Percy had never wanted to show them to anyone. Ever. He barely looked at them himself. They were nothing but a reminder of everything terrible that had happened in Whitestone. Of everything he had *lost*. The monsters on his List had ripped everything from him, up to and including control over his very flesh. His clothes gave him that control back, or at least the illusion of it. His boots and coat provided a layer of physical protection between his skin and anything that might wish to hurt him. With his glasses, he could see threats, and with his pepperbox, he could neutralize them.

With his gear, he was no longer a helpless little boy, bleeding and crying and shivering as his family died around him. But Percy had nothing right now. Nothing.

He was vulnerable, and vulnerability meant agony.

The air turned colder as the sun sank lower. Water dripped off of him like blood, chilling him further. Goosebumps broke out across his exposed flesh, in other words, *all* of it. Memories he'd rather not relive clamored to the surface, as they always did when he was cold and damp. Memories of faceless corpses and iron chains, of tiled floors stained red. Of his mother's screams. Of pain, pain, *pain*. Of Cassandra's hand slipping from his. Of waking up on a boat deck and realizing he was utterly alone in an incredibly hostile world. Of being vulnerable, and in agony *because* he was vulnerable, and being vulnerable *because* he was in agony.

He shuddered, then steeled himself. He wasn't *there*, he was *here*. Where his so-called 'friends' conspired to humiliate him, to render him helpless. They wished to make his trauma the punchline of a joke.

This is their fault. Make them pay.

Percy lit the match to the bitter shame and fear in his gut and forged it into anger. It was a familiar process. Anger meant action, action meant change, change meant *fixing the problem*. He wasn't a cowering child anymore. He'd grown, and learned, and gotten stronger. He wouldn't wait for an inglorious rescue. He'd get his gear back himself. He'd reclaim his control, his protection, his agency. How *dare* those he thought he could trust take those things from him. *Again.* How *dare* they.

Take it all back.

The familiar bile of betrayal burned in his throat. The ground was rough under his unshod feet as he made his way back to camp. He ignored that pain, just as every day he ignored the

lingering pain of the scar tissue marring his body, his heart, his mind. Smoke from the campfire blew in his face, yet his eyes didn't water from the irritation, and no cough caught in his throat. Rather, he intentionally breathed in the familiar smell of ash and charcoal, letting it remind him of days spent in the forge, building his weapon, building safety for himself and vengeance for the de Rolos. He felt no need to use his hands to cover himself as the others came into view - as his father once told him, his dignity was not in his clothing but in his bearing.

He was Percival Frederickstein von Musel Klossowski de Rolo the Third, the *last* de Rolo, and he would reclaim what was rightfully his.

A few more steps and he caught the attention of Vox Machina as they sat around the fire. Their cheerful chatter stopped as everyone turned to look at him. Percy clenched his fists (*gods below he wanted, <u>needed</u> his pepperbox in his hands again*) and turned in a slow circle. He kept his chin high and his eyes distant. They would not take his pride as well. If they wanted to see so badly, let them *see*. Let them glut themselves on their morbid curiosity until they *puked*. Let them be overwhelmed with horror, or pity, or shock, or whatever else they felt when they looked at him. If he could live in this body then they could live with the consequences of revealing it. They were just as sadistic as Dr. Ripley for wanting to expose him, to cut him open with their raking eyes just for the sick pleasure of reopening old wounds and watching him bleed. They *deserved* any comparatively minor emotional discomfort their actions had wrought.

They deserve so much worse. Get your revenge so they can never hurt you again.

A twig snapped behind him. Percy pulled back his arm as he turned, fist already clenched, ready to make them pay in agony for making him vulnerable.

Pain for pain. It's only fair.

Vex stared at him from across the fire like she wanted to eat him alive.

Percy *had* been eaten alive before (*~~tied to a chair as Sylas Briarwood licked his bloody lips~~*), but Vex's look was… different than that predatory gaze. It was also different from Dr. Ripley's clinical interest (*~~fully at her mercy, sweat-slick and aching and gutted in more ways than one~~).* Yet it was something of both. Predatory and intellectual and carnal all at the same time, as though she wanted to devour him - body, mind, and soul.

It stunned him to realize that he *wanted* her to. Complete vulnerability would be a worthy trade for the sweet agony Vex promised without words. Percy *desired* to fill her every appetite. The inferno inside abruptly switched from rage to a different emotion entirely.

Fuck.

Percy grabbed his things and fled with as much dignity as he could salvage from this disaster of a situation. He didn't pay attention to where he was going - *away* was the most important thing. He kept moving until his adrenaline-shaky knees gave out and sent him crashing to the forest floor. Distantly, he could hear subdued sounds of horror as Vox Machina reacted to what had just happened. He hoped they felt guilty as hell, because they were. The bitter

thought was half-hearted, lukewarm. Nothing like the urge for violence (*of murder and revenge*) that had flamed so hot before. The scorching fury that had propelled him into camp had been extinguished - the *everythingness* of the last few minutes crashing into him like hitting icy water. He gasped at the force of the impact.

He was just as wet as if he'd *actually* just pulled himself from the river. With a jolt, he realized his skin was streaked with blood. He'd scratched himself something awful tearing through the woods. Thorns had lashed open the lines of older scars. The wounds weren't deep, but *cold and wet and covered in blood and in pain* made his smoke-raw throat tense even tighter and his blurry vision waver.

He was vulnerable, and vulnerability meant agony.

Percy's diaphragm worked overtime, but the sweet relief of oxygen never came. His chest *ached,* hollow and too-full all at once. His fingernails looked almost blue against his ashen skin. His pulse thundered in his ears. Percy knew what physical and psychic shock felt like - it felt like this. If he didn't act quickly everything would become worse than it already was. Desperately, he scrabbled for his pack.

His pepperbox felt like salvation in his hand. He wasn't helpless. Not anymore. The snarling rage in his soul finally calmed completely. Now he could fight. He could make those who tried to hurt him *hurt*. It was a colder comfort than he'd thought it would be, considering the intensity of his compulsion to regain his weapon.

Next, Percy dug through various pockets until he found a minor healing potion. It was a waste of coin that Vex would likely chide him for (*don't think about Vex don't think about Vex don't think about Vex),* but right now he couldn't go back and face the others. He was an idiot for thinking they actually *cared* for him. (*Vex doesn't care for him, that look meant nothing, he's reading too much into it, he's delusional, there's no possible way that she would want someone as broken as him, and even if she did she deserves so much better. Also, <u>don't think about Vex.</u>)* He shuddered as the slimy potion slipped down his throat, he shuddered at the all-too-familiar sensation of his skin magically closing, he shuddered as a stray breeze turned his already clammy skin frigid, he shuddered when he didn't think about Vex.

Trust led to betrayal led to vulnerability led to agony. It was inevitable and he was an utter fool for not heeding that hard-earned lesson. The only person Percy could trust was himself. Alone. It was as simple as that.

It was difficult, wiping away the blood and getting properly dressed without putting down the List. But Percy couldn't bear to let it go. Not until he had his glasses on his face (*now he could see, he could aim),* his boots on his feet (*now he could run, he could flee),* and the weight of his reinforced coat around his shoulders (*now he was protected, he could endure)*. With each piece of gear returned to its proper place, he felt more himself. Less like that beaten feral creature he'd been in the dungeon and more like the competent adventurer he was now. Slowly, he started to warm. His shaking eased, then finally stilled. He wiped his face with his handkerchief yet again, and pretended that the dampness on his cheeks was from water dripping from his long-dried hair.

He wasn't vulnerable. He wasn't in agony. He was alone. He was safe.

For the first time since he saw the empty beach, Percy *breathed*.

Chapter End Notes

I based the relative ages of the de Rolos from what we saw on the tv show - namely, that Cassandra is not the youngest as she is in the live stream. That said, I'm including Ludwig, who is not present in the tv show. idk how we're supposed to reconcile these two sources of contradictory cannon, tbh, but I'm trying my best.

Percy is easy on the eyes, and Vex has eyes. She also is known to have fierce desires. That's my excuse and I'm sticking to it.

Thanks again for all the kudos, comments, and subscribes!

Chapter 6: Scanlan - Week 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scanlan learned that Percy had perfect pitch.

At first, however, he thought he was just a music snob.

The story went like this: after a rousing day of thrilling heroics, Vox Machina neé the Super High Intensity Team was about to engage in some well-earned revelry. The inn they were staying at had a tinny old piano in the corner, and the Tobaxi sitting at it knew what he was doing. Scanlan immediately resolved to spend some quality time playing accompaniment. And possibly *playing accompaniment* later, if you catch his drift.

“I’m going to bed,” Percy announced before they’d even made it to an open table.

“Whatever for, darling?” Vex said. She used the endearment fairly often, honestly, but it was increasingly becoming Percy’s exclusive domain. Scanlan wondered if she was doing that on purpose. Perhaps she wasn’t aware at all. Either way, an interesting development.

Percy’s pale coloring did him no favors in hiding his blush at her familiar form of address. It wasn’t a secret to anyone but Percy and Vex that he had been smitten with her since the moment he laid eyes on her. Scanlan was already three stanzas into writing a love sonnet for their wedding. He would rib Percy endlessly for not shooting his metaphorical shot already, but that seemed a bit like bullying. Matters of the heart were *delicate*. Especially when you were a former noble and wanted to do things *correctly* with appropriate propriety and all that jazz. So Scanlan resigned himself to enjoying their little back-and-forth flirting for the foreseeable future - building the tension was an important part of romance, after all. It certainly helped his patience that Scanlan was making a fortune betting with Grog how long it would take before Vax lost his shit and stabbed Percy for daring to look at his sister's ankles or something. Smart money was on two weeks.

“Not really my kind of music,” Percy gestured dismissively at the piano with a bit of a wince. “And after that last fight my pepperbox is in dire need of repairs.”

Scanlan bristled at his attitude. The tune would probably be out of place in a castle, sure, but it was played with skill and passion and the audience was enjoying it. In his opinion, there was no better music out there. But Percy didn’t linger to hear Scanlan’s impending diatribe. He was already at the bar, getting his customary glass of red wine and exchanging a few words with the bartender.

He put the exchange out of his mind. Percy was a ponce - that wasn’t news. His tastes were “refined” aka expensive and generally more about appearances than actual content. That wasn’t news either. There were better things to worry about, such as how the excellently-played swing beat was making the Tobaxi’s tail do some *very* interesting things.

It was about six in the morning when Scanlan staggered out of Nawlin's ground-floor room. He was *never* going to get all the fur out of his clothes (and other places) but honestly he didn't mind having a little reminder of a *very* pleasant evening. To his surprise, quiet piano music wafted through the air. It was a fairly simple waltz, played with the hesitance of a dusty memory. But the piano itself sounded completely different. Gone was the sporadic rattle. And the buzzing on the top notes. And the sticky key in the middle. And the woefully out-of-tune lower two octaves.

In short, it sounded like a piano you might find in a castle parlor.

Despite his hangover and glorious after-sex buzz, Scanlan was wide awake by the time the song came to an abrupt end.

"Damn F-sharp is still off," Percy muttered to himself. "Gonna have to replace that pin after all."

He laid down on his back under the keyboard. After a bit of fumbling, he grabbed a tool off the bench and stuck it deep into the bowels of the upright piano. Various mechanical sounds and muffled swearing followed. A few minutes later, he reached awkwardly over his head to blindly press the keys. Due to his significantly hindered aim, all his efforts resulted in discordant plunking.

"Get over here and make yourself useful," Percy called. In a daze, Scanlan stepped forward. How he knew he was there was a mystery for another time. "Press the F-sharp-four, would you?"

Scanlan, to his shame, had absolutely no fucking idea what that meant. He knew what an F-sharp was, of course. But he didn't know what the "four" part meant.

Sensing his hesitation, Percy clarified. "The one above middle C."

Ah. Of course. Naturally the one in the middle would be the fourth one. Any idiot would guess that.

Scanlan awkwardly leaned over Percy's prone body to press the appropriate key. The pitch warped and wavered a bit as he did something to the innards, then stabilized.

"Much better. Now, let's try that again."

Percy scrambled upright, then played a series of quick chords. Something in his shoulders relaxed at the sound, and his lips quirked into a proud grin.

"How long have you been at this?" Scanlan asked.

"Since the bar closed at midnight," Percy said absently. He shifted to playing a series of meandering arpeggios. Unlike the waltz, they were played with the surety of long-worn muscle memory. "Why?"

"Because last I checked, humans need eight hours of rest a night, and it's almost sunrise."

Percy glanced out the window at the pinking clouds and winced. “Well, that’s why the gods invented coffee.”

Scanlan elected not to argue. They didn’t have anything more strenuous than shopping planned for today, and he knew that Percy had done far more on far less sleep. But still.

He nodded at the piano. “The owner ok with you doing this?”

“He’s paying me 100 gold for it.”

Damn. That was more than they’d made on their last bounty.

“Vex should be pleased.”

Percy attempted to cover his blush at the thought of Vex’s pleasure with a scowl. “Mostly I wanted the blasted thing to be in tune. There’s no way I could have slept anyway with that discordant mess clashing away.”

Vex *was* thrilled at the bag of money Percy tossed her way over breakfast. So thrilled, in fact, that she planted a kiss right on his cheek, and Percy clearly forgot how to function for a full minute. The only thing more hilarious was the glower on Vax’s face. That night, Percy actually stayed to participate in some proper revelry. Scanlan admitted that Nawlin’s playing sounded even better on a properly adjusted instrument.

The next verse of the song went like this: Scanlan was tuning his lute. He had some decent lyrics for his next piece, but needed to work out some kinks in the chord progression to sing it to. A while back he’d bought a proper tuning charm, but it was now lost in the bottom of the Bag of Holding and he couldn’t be arsed to dig it back out. His ear was good enough for some draft work. It wasn’t like this was a performance or anything.

Then again, Pike *could* be listening. Might be worth the bother to do this right…

“Your D-string is too sharp,” Percy said out of nowhere. “About seven cents, if you’re using the standard threading.”

Scanlan plucked the offending string. It *did* seem a bit off. Huh.

“Didn’t know you played,” he observed. “Besides the piano, of course.”

“I don’t.” He paused for a moment, his greasy fingers stilling on his pepperbox. In a quieter voice, he added, “My elder sister played violin. We would rehearse together.”

Now, Scanlan had a well-earned reputation for being a joker, but he wasn’t a fool. Between the tone and the past-tense, he’d bet good money that Percy’s sister was dead. Now *that* was a stick of gunpowder he had no intention of setting off. Vox Machina had known de Rolo for about a month now, and they collectively knew next to nothing about his past. They’d learned quickly not to ask - Percy always responded to pointed questions with a full 24 hours of silent treatment. Minimum. It was unheard of for him to voluntarily divulge personal information. Especially to *Scanlan* of all people. Keyleth or Vex or even Vax, he’d get. But he’d be the

first to admit that he wasn't particularly close with Percy. In fact, they were probably the *least* close of anyone in the group.

Maybe that was it. Scanlan found it easier to share intimacy with strangers too.

He corrected the tension on his lute, letting Percy have a moment of peace, should he want it. Scanlan decided it wouldn't do anyone any good to push, so he elected to ignore the issue of Percy's sister and focus on the issue of tuning instead. Never let it be said that he couldn't be tactful when the occasion called for it.

"So how did you know my D-string was tight?"

"Because it was." Percy didn't look up from his work, but the hunch in his shoulders eased. He'd obviously not meant to share that tidbit about his past and was glad Scanlan wasn't pressing. "The mathematical calculation isn't terribly complicated, once you know the proper dimensions and conversion to wavelength frequency. Pythagorean…"

"...I'm gonna cut you off right there," Scanlan interrupted. He had no desire to listen to one of Percy von my-education-cost-more-than-all-the-money-you've-ever-made de Rolo's interminable lectures. "Not what I was asking. You don't have any magic that you've admitted to, and my tuning charm is still buried. So how did you know the right pitch?"

"I haven't admitted to any magic because I don't have any. Indeed, I prefer it that way. Science is far more dependable."

Scanlan had to laugh at that. Sure, Percy's 'scientific' pepperbox was a powerful weapon. When it worked. Which wasn't terribly often, honestly. It seemed he spent half their battles hiding behind some barely-there cover scrambling to set things to rights after a misfire. Scanlan would much rather trust a good shawm and a rousing melody in a fight.

"Sure thing, buddy."

"Though I've observed some interesting correlations to musical theory with your particular brand of magic. Did you know you can lift almost twenty percent more weight with your magehand when you sing it on a E-flat-five verses an G-five?"

Kindly, what the Everlightin' fuck?

"In Common for the plebes, if you would?"

"Your cantrip," Percy waved his hand around, "is more effective when you sing the trigger phrase *here*," he hummed a note, "instead of *here*," he hummed a higher note. "It might be worth your time to experiment with other pitches to determine which ones are more efficacious depending on the particular situation."

Scanlan had never put any particular thought into it before, honestly. His magic was largely instinctual - he did whatever felt right in the moment. He definitely got *better* at it as he gained experience both on and off the battlefield, but then again, didn't every performer improve with practice? The idea that there was any sort of connection between pitch and

strength had never occurred to him - his mentors had all insisted that the power came from his emotions and his ability to inspire them in others.

“Oh, and if you’re targeting Grog, especially if he’s raging, you should play your buffs in E-major.” Before he could ask for clarification, Percy was gone. Scanlan suddenly realized the slippery noble had changed the topic so smoothly that one, he hadn’t noticed, and two, he’d never actually answered his question about knowing the right pitch.

Over the next few days, Scanlan did some experimenting. And damn him if Percy wasn’t right.

The final act of the opera went like this: they were stuck in a dungeon trap that Vax hadn’t managed to find in time.

It wasn’t exactly a dungeon, per se. It was actually an old temple that needed to be cleared of harpies. But it was old, and stone, and smelled of dusty old mold and shit. Basically a dungeon.

It was anyone’s guess who triggered the trap. They’d been through this hallway before without issue. Perhaps some of the loot they’d picked up in the sanctuary set it off. In any case, two walls had slammed down on either end of the hallway, and they were rapidly pulling closer. In less than a minute, the party would be crushed.

Above the cacophony of grinding mechanics, Vax yelled, “Can anybody read this?”

Never a good sign. Scanlan was no scholar, but he took a look anyway. The looping script carved into the wall was vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

“That’s Celestial,” Pike said. “I recognize it from some of my cleric training. But I can’t read it.”

“I can,” Percy pushed forward. He’d been fairly quiet for most of the crawl, as he usually was when they were someplace cold and dark and damp. Probably reminded him of that prison they’d rescued him from, poor sap. He smiled as he scanned the text.

“Oh, that’s a clever little riddle.”

“It’ll be more clever when you get us out of this trap,” Vex snapped, eyes darting between the soon-to-be-smushing-them stones.

Percy gave her a *look*, squared his shoulders, opened his mouth, and *sang*.

Scanlan’s jaw dropped, and not just because the walls of doom vanished just as quickly as they’d appeared. He’d never heard Percy sing - he’d only heard him hum a note or two on occasion. Their gunslinger was *good*. Absolutely bang-on pitch, matched with a delightfully smoky tone. If Scanlan were a lesser musician he’d feel threatened. As it was, he was merely shocked that Percy was a baritone and not a tenor. Now he owed Vax five gold, damnit.

“Where the hell did *that* come from?”

Percy wouldn't meet his eye as he brushed off his coat. "I'm fluent in Celestial."

"I gathered that," Scanlan planted his fists on his hips. "But how? I thought only celestials, aasimar, or high-level clerics could do that, and you don't strike me as any of the above."

"I'm not, and you don't have to be. It's just a rather difficult language to learn - practically impossible, really, unless you have perfect pitch."

Cue the punchline. *Buh-dum-tish* .

Scanlan felt the right idiot for not putting it together sooner. Percy could pinpoint the pitches of his cantrips mid-battle, for fuck's sake. No wonder he'd been so aggressive about tuning that piano a few towns back. To his sensitive ear, it would have sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

"You sounded good, darling," Vex brushed a hand against Percy's shoulder. "You should sing more often."

Percy's smile at being close to Vex dimmed a few notches. "I'm afraid I must disappoint you. I can't sing more than a few bars. Not anymore."

"Whyever not?"

"My vocal cords were damaged," Percy turned away and started briskly walking down the hallway toward the exit.

"Doing what?" Scanlan jogged to keep up. Any information about Percy was too good of a story to just let go. His tale was a tragic one, perhaps, but some of the best tales were tragedies.

"Screaming."

He said it so frankly, completely without any emotional overtones whatsoever. Like he was ordering another glass of red wine. Like saying shit like that was normal and obvious and ok. Even though it absolutely wasn't. In any possible way. What the *fuck* de Rolo?!

Scanlan stopped dead in his tracks in shock, but no one else seemed to have heard.

The encore went like this: Scanlan was tuning his lute.

What? It needed it almost as frequently as Percy's pepperbox needed fixing. They ended up sitting together, caring for their chosen weapons, more often than not.

"Give me a B-flat?" Scanlan asked. Percy hummed the correct note. Scanlan had to admit his magic *had* been more effective ever since he started using Percy to tune his instruments.

"How'd that song go? The one we heard from the traveling druids last week."

Percy could sing for about fifteen seconds at a stretch before his voice started going hoarse. But that was five seconds more than he could last week when Scanlan had gently coerced him into singing a few bars. As a bard, he'd had vocal injuries from overuse before. He knew the rehabilitation exercises that would build strength and teach the right techniques to prevent damage in the future. With a bit of time and careful practice, he'd have Percy singing properly again.

And then they'd be able to make some *music*.

Chapter End Notes

Writing this chapter was like pulling teeth. Scanlan would not cooperate. I re-wrote it from the premise up twice, and it's still nowhere near the quality I want it to be, so I apologize for that. ~~But better trash than nothing, I guess?~~

> Post-posting edit: Holy shit I did not expect this chapter to be such a fan favorite! Thank you all for your kind comments. Shoutout to all the musicians out there <3

It was tricky to pick some aspect of Percy that Scanlan might pick up on that no one else would. Thankfully I remembered that Percy speaks Celestial, and I've read other stories where that language is described as music. I just expanded on that idea.

Aristocratic children were expected to be able to play at least one instrument for entertainment purposes. With seven children, Frederick and Johanna could have themselves a proper band. Between Percy's inclination towards mechanical devices and his general dexterity score, I thought a piano was the perfect fit. The fact that I also play piano had no impact on that decision whatsoever. Really.

I spent a long time with a pitchfinder listening to Sam Riegel shriek "Scanlan's Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaand" to figure out the right notes for this. Yes, I realize that technically speaking Bigby's hand has a set weight limit, but we see in the TV show that its capabilities vary depending on the genre of music Scanlan plays. I don't think a little messing with pitch is too far off base.

And yes, I'm aware that perfect pitch generally doesn't work like this in our universe, but this is Exandrian Perfect Pitch™ and it does work like this, thank you very much. Ditto vocal injuries. Source: I said so, and this is my fanfic :P

Chapter 7: Keyleth - Month 2

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is much darker (and much longer) so heads up. If your self-talk is anything like Keyleth's here, please talk to a trusted friend or therapist. You are more competent than you realize and you are worthwhile and wonderful exactly as you are. Also, this chapter deals rather explicitly with the (canonical) death of an innocent kid, so please take care of yourself and skip this if that's upsetting to you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keyleth learned that Percy was *really* good with children.

They don't really run into a lot of kids in their line of work. Dungeons, forests, and taverns aren't really child-friendly spaces. Quite the opposite, in fact. So they'd been traveling together for some time before Keyleth had the opportunity to see Percy and a youngling in the same room together.

Percy had a very particular way of handling strangers of any age. It put her in mind of how two animals sized each other up when there was a territory dispute, all puffed fur and flashing feathers and waving of claws and low growls. Percy would throw back his shoulders and puff out his chest so he filled out his coat even better than he usually did. He'd raise his chin and peer down his nose through his intimidating glasses. He'd speak with his haughtiest accent, the one that made Vax scowl and Vex smirk, using words that were at least two syllables longer than his usually elevated diction. He didn't really ask questions - they were more like demands, and phrased in a way that ensured the answer was always 'yessir'.

The whole display made Keyleth jealous as hell. Gods, what she wouldn't give to be half that confident, half that eloquent.

That said, while that kind of attitude was generally effective at asserting dominance and ensuring compliance, it rarely made Percy friends. Intimidation didn't exactly translate well into cordiality, and all that. Keyleth knew Percy *could* be friendly - when he put his mind to it at least (they were friends, after all, *best* friends, even) – and he never did anything without a reason (even his recklessness had a certain methodology to it) which meant that his display of affronted nobleman *must* be intentional. Why, she couldn't quite figure out. Everyone in Vox Machina had a certain level of distrust and prickliness towards strangers, but Percy really took it to the next level.

Point being, the first time she saw him meet a child, she wasn't shocked when he gave the barest of greetings, then did a remarkable impression of a cactus in a florists's front window - all aloof spikes and a clear desire to be elsewhere.

Keyleth, on the other hand, liked kids. Adored them, really. They were uncomplicated, without artifice. She didn't have to worry so much about propriety, or being too messy, or laughing too loud. She could just have *fun* and enjoy being alive. Kids seemed to like her too - especially when she wildshaped for them, or used her vines to make playgrounds for them, or otherwise use her magic to make their lives just a bit more delightful, if even for a few minutes.

Yet the facts were inescapable: one, there was currently a too-small corpse on the ground of the creepy mansion's library floor. Two, Keyleth had killed that child with her magic.

The Dread Emperor lay dead also, but that wasn't nearly as important as the rumpled pile of rags and wrong-angled limbs at the foot of his dias. She'd done that. That child had been

alive, and begging her for help, and she was foolish and hasty and incompetent and had snapped his neck instead of saving him. She could feel the other children staring at her in horror, even now. Feel the rest of Vox Machina staring at her in horror. If she could, she'd be staring at herself in horror too. As it was, she was absolutely horrified.

She had murdered an innocent child.

"Hey," Keyleth flinched as Percy laid a gentle hand on her arm. He didn't often initiate physical contact, though she suspected that he craved it deep-down. "This isn't your fault."

Of *course* it was her fault. She'd felt the tension through her vines, the *crack* that had reverberated down her arm as the child's vertebra shattered under the strain. It had been her choice to cast that spell in that way, her strength and her magic. No one had made her do that. It was *her* fault.

She was a murderer.

"Keyleth, look at me, please?"

She tried, though Percy was blurry through her tears. He gently wiped them away with his silk handkerchief. It smelled like the rose cologne she'd made for him on a whim.

"The Dread Emperor did this. Not you. He's the one who chose to use children to bolster his own health. You were just trying to help. Oh, and for the record," Percy lightened his tone just a bit, "Speaking as someone with a rather pretentious name, 'Dread Emperor' is the most ridiculous moniker I've ever heard."

Despite herself, Keyleth had to laugh at that. He smirked in response, clearly happy to have made her happy. She sobered quickly when she caught sight of the other children huddled in the corner. The *living* children. As opposed to the dead one in the middle of the room. Who wasn't living anymore. Because of what *Keyleth* had done. Gods, she didn't even know his *name.*

"I *felt* it," she whispered. Somehow she'd gone from barely touching Percy to being curled into his chest with his arms wrapped tightly around her. "When he died. When I *killed* him," she amended. The very least she could do is own up to her crimes. "I *felt* it."

"I know," Percy whispered into her hair. He shuddered, a full-body shake that rattled through Keyleth's clenched teeth. "I *know*. I've… I know what it's like. To feel them die. To hold them in your hands, all their hopes and laughter and possibilities, a whole lifetime of them, and they *trust* you to keep them safe. To make it *better.* But then, despite how tightly you hold on, they slip through your fingers. One second they're *alive* and the next… they're gone. And there's nothing you can do. Nothing you *could* have done. It's… I wish you didn't know what that feels like." Percy's breath hitched. If Keyleth hadn't been pressed so close she probably would have missed it. "What happened, happened, as awful as that is and always will be. *But his death wasn't your fault*. Please believe me on that point, Keyleth, if you don't believe anything else I've ever told you."

He squeezed her just a bit tighter, like he could weld all of her broken pieces together like one of his metal machines. And after a long minute, she *did* feel just a bit more whole. Percy wasn't magical, per se, but he did have a talent for fixing things. He was a good friend. Better than what Keyleth deserved.

"You can best honor his memory by moving forward," Percy whispered into her hair. "It's not easy, but that's the right way. We can do it together."

One of the things Keyleth liked about Percy was that he invited people in to help implement whatever solution he'd already figured out. Whether that was letting her hold bolts for his pepperbox or letting Scanlan give the right answer to a riddled door or showing Grog how a spring deadfall trap worked by letting him set it off, he allowed others to participate in his cleverness. Another way he was a good leader, in her opinion. He wanted others to learn from his knowledge and experience. He was smart, and he knew he was smart, but he wanted to teach others to be smart too.

"It's done," Vax stepped up beside them. He tucked away his lockpicking set with a few brusque movements. Right. The chains on the other three kids might have been broken, but the collars would have needed to be removed. Vax was good and helpful like that, always setting people free.

"Right," Percy closed his eyes and took a deep breath through his nose like he did when he was steeling himself for something that he'd already determined was the only course of action, but didn't particularly want to do. He deftly handed Keyleth off to Vax, then walked towards the dais. Perhaps he wanted to analyze that awful armor. Or look at some of the books in the library. He didn't cope well with strong emotions - he always went off hunting for a problem to fix or a puzzle to solve instead. It made sense for him to bolt at the first opportunity after taking on a whole pile of heavy feelings from Keyleth. She tried not to take it personally, or read too much into it.

"Let's get you out of here Kiki," Vax said. His arm was warm around her shoulders. She let herself be led away like the wreck she was.

The others had managed to gather the rest of the children into one of the mansion's side rooms. Scanlan was trying, rather unsuccessfully, to entertain them with a silly story. They watched his exaggerated movements with wide, terrified eyes and did not laugh at his antics. Pike was trying to console a weeping child who appeared petrified of Grog, who was trying his best to make himself smaller by cramming himself behind a bookcase and was making a mess of it. Vex, true to form, had stationed herself in the doorway as a guard, bow half-drawn. Trinket was exiled to the far end of the hallway, his presence clearly even more upsetting than Grog's to the children.

Honor his memory by moving forward. Perhaps if she could help the other kids, she could start to atone for what she did. Maybe.

Keyleth knelt down next to a little girl with two blond braids. She was one of the ones the others had successfully rescued from the Dread Emperor, if memory served. Carefully,

Keyleth grew a daffodil in her palm, a representation of care and goodwill. It was a popular trick that she'd done dozens of times.

The little girl burst into tears and ran away. Right. She'd just seen Keyleth kill one of her friends with her plants. Of course she wouldn't like magical flowers. Keyleth was an idiot and a monster and just the absolute worst. She retreated into the corner of the room opposite Grog and tried and failed not to cry. Vax tried to comfort her, to his credit, but she just… just *couldn't*, right now.

Percy returned with the Bag of Colding on his hip and ten more years on his already prematurely aged face. He observed the current awkward state of the room - half the people in it were crying and the rest were obviously shellshocked. Vox Machina was clearly at a loss on how to make things better.

Percy, however, always had a plan. He was competent and confident even when the world was falling to pieces all around them. He was logical and useful like that. Keyleth watched between tear-wet lashes as he got down on one knee near the edge of the room. Close enough to be within arm's reach of the nearest child, but not so close as to crowd. She had no idea how he was going to fix this mess, especially since he didn't trust strangers and didn't even like kids.

"I am Percival Frederickstein von Musel Klowosski de Rolo the Third, at your service, your royal highness, Gren Tal'Dorei, prince of the realm."

One of the older boys stepped forward from the huddled mess. He was filthy, and his eyes were tearstained, but he had been coached enough to be able to respond to the formality.

"Thank you for rescuing us, Mister de Rolo." Tellingly, Percy didn't ask for Gren to call him by his first name. Though he did wince a bit at the 'mister'.

"Of course, your highness. May we offer you and your companions some refreshments to help you recover after your ordeal?"

"Yes, please. It has been a… trying day."

"One moment, your highness. If you could seat our guests, I will procure suitable victuals."

It was beyond surreal to watch the two of them go through the motions of upper-crust civility while covered in blood and dirt. Yet something about the interaction seemed to settle them both. Some of the stress lines in Percy's face started to fade, and the shaky edge to Gren's voice steadied the longer he spoke. Huh. Maybe all that aristocratic nonsense had a use after all. Perhaps the rote nature of propriety allowed them to build structure, and familiarity, and therefore control, over this impossible situation. An interesting thought that she would have to discuss with Percy later.

Within moments Gren had taken charge of the children, ordering cushions to be pilfered from the couches lining the edges of the room and arranged in a long oval in the middle of the carpet. The children sat down without too much fuss, though there was some debate over the better spots and softer pillows. Percy instructed Grog to pull out some bread and cheese and

dried meat and fruit from the Bag of Holding. They didn't have enough silverware for everyone, but Vex found a tablecloth from somewhere and they laid that down in the middle and made do. Vax pulled out one of his not-for-murdering-things daggers and made sure everything was cut up into kid-sized portions. When they were all set up, Pike said grace and they all dug in. The kids were clearly more used to playing pretend tea with royalty than actually eating dinner with royalty, but that didn't seem to matter much. Vox Machina didn't exactly have much experience with fancy dinners either. (Collectively, at least - Vex and Vax seemed to know what they were doing, even if they didn't particularly seem to like it; Scanlan and Pike were a bit rusty but clearly knew what *not* to do; Percy, of course, was an expert; and even Grog seemed to be taking the hint to be a bit less violent in his eating techniques.) Scanlan broke out his lute and played some gentle dinner music. If she'd been feeling anything other than (rightfully) miserable, Keyleth would have really enjoyed the improvised picnic. As it was, she stayed in her corner and tried and failed to ignore the memory of her etiquette tutor chastising her for being unsociable and rude and also, you know, *a murderer*.

"We can't open a portal and get home until we take a long rest," Vex announced as dinner wound down. "So we've got to make ourselves comfortable here. Do you kids have some sort of bedroom?"

It turned out that what they had was a sad pile of rags in what was clearly a storage closet. That wouldn't do. So Percy sent the rest of Vox Machina looking for more cushions, blankets, and anything soft they could find in the castle and in the Bag of Holding.

At that point, the sugar from dinner had properly kicked in, and the children felt comfortable enough to start to play. Percy used that energy to his advantage, instructing the kids to pile pillows in strategic spots and to hold blankets steady while one of the adults secured them in place. Within an hour he'd constructed a rather impressive blanket fort, just big enough for all of them. The kids, of course, loved it. Twenty happily shrieking children in the small space gave Keyleth a bit of a headache, honestly, but it was still good to hear.

"Silence." Percy said it, didn't yell it, but there was a resonance to his voice that quieted all of the children immediately. Keyleth was strongly reminded of her father, for some reason.

"It's time for bed," he said in a more soothing tone of voice. "Find a spot and get comfortable."

"It's so *dark*," one of the little girls whimpered. The dusky light of this half-realm had indeed dimmed, and the shadows within the room stretched long. The only light within the fort came from Pike's gently-glowing amulet. Keyleth didn't want to know how black it would be without the benefit of darkvision. She considered triggering one of her cantrips, but decided against it. They were scared of her magic, with good reason. And knowing her, she'd just set the whole blanket fort on fire and kill *another* kid.

"I know it's dark," Percy said. He pulled the little girl into his arms. He seemed familiar with the motion, comfortable and confident and graceful. Of course, that's how Percy always moved, unless he was in the middle of being surprised. Meanwhile, Keyleth was perpetually stuck in the awkward gangly teenager phase, tripping over her own feet and dropping things

and pulling too hard on her vines and snapping children's necks because she couldn't figure out even the basics of control.

"You know, I can't see very well either, even in the daylight," Percy tapped his glasses and a few of the kids chuckled. "But my friends can see clearly even when it's almost pitch black. They will keep watch for us, and make sure we are safe tonight. They are very good at their jobs, so we don't have to be afraid. Instead, we can have a little fun of our own. Do you know what the best thing to do in the dark is?"

A small chorus of shaky 'no's.

"*Telling stories*. Now, let me see… ah. I've got a good one. You'll like this, Maria, the main character has your name. She's very brave, just like you. Once upon a time…"

Percy was a *good* storyteller. Keyleth had no idea. Neither did Scanlan, judging from the impressed noises he kept making. Percy had a way of modulating his voice so that you could practically *see* what he was describing, drawing out pauses in all the right spots to make you lean forward with eagerness to know what came next. He did have a tendency to ramble on a bit, but that just made it more relaxing to listen to. The story he told was one Keyleth knew, but he kept changing minor details to make it more relevant to his current audience. She was fairly sure the protagonist was named 'Ella' not 'Maria', and that she'd been trapped in a tower, not an evil castle, and she'd been assisted by a team of rodents, not a giant bear. But no matter. The kids were enthralled. Before she realized what was happening, Keyleth was lulled to sleep as well.

When she woke (thankfully she hadn't dreamed, the boy she murdered was going to haunt her enough while she was awake) Percy was comforting a freckled gnomish girl in the dim light of a foggy morning.

"Nightmares can be awful," he empathized. "But it's over. You're safe now. Look around: do you see any monsters?"

A timid headshake.

"If there *were* any monsters, I would keep them away from you with this," he patted his holster. Spotting Keyleth, he gestured toward her as well. "And my friend Keyleth would take you far away to someplace safer. Does that make sense?"

Keyleth noted that he didn't say that her nightmares weren't real, or that they were 'just' nightmares. He took her fear seriously, then took steps to show her that it was unwarranted in the waking world.

"Now, would you like a hug, a drink of water, or something to eat?"

Soon he was pulling one of his jealously-guarded sugar cubes (*for my morning coffee only, Grog, I'll not say it again - those puppy eyes might work on Pike but they do not work on me and Vex get your brother's thieving fingers out of my coat or I will shoot them off so help me*) out of one of his pockets. Keyleth was impressed. He hadn't asked the child 'what would make you feel better' because undoubtedly she would have asked for her parents, or a stuffed

animal, or something else they couldn't possibly provide. Instead, he offered what he had, and she calmed down because she had a measure of control over her situation.

As soon as Keyleth opened the portal, the children scattered like a flock of startled birds. They should have expected that kind of a response - the last time the children had traveled through a portal they'd been ripped from everything they knew and everyone they loved to work as slaves for a sadistic monster. By the time everyone settled, Percy looked like a mother hen, there were so many younglings huddled underneath the wings of his greatcoat. The most terrified child had even managed to find their way into his arms. It was absolutely adorable, even if scaring the kids even more with her magic made Keyleth want to curl up and die.

It was going to be difficult to convince the traumatized kids to face their worst fear, especially so soon. Grog was all of a mind to just grab the lot and throw them through like softballs. But Percy found a better way. In fact, he'd *planned* for this. Of course he had. He was a clever strategist.

"Remember the story last night? How did Maria escape the evil castle?"

"By going through the portal that the magic bear opened up," Gren spoke up.

"Exactly. And here we are, in an evil castle, and need to escape. So what do you think we should do?"

"Go through the portal!" the young ones chorused.

"Sounds like a reasonable plan. Trinket, would you care to lead the way?"

Vax actually went first, to make sure there wasn't any trouble waiting for them on the other side. Once he gave the all-clear, Vex helped a few of the kids sit on her bear's back, and then they went through together. More clustered around Percy - hanging onto his coattails, clinging to his pant leg, burrowed in his arms. A brave few went with Grog and Pike and Scanlan. Keyleth went through last. Alone.

The sky was bright blue, the birds were singing, the grass was green. The earth smelled of good growing things, not that pervasive rot of the island. Despite the tight ache in her chest, Keyleth felt she could *breathe* for the first time in days.

The children also perked up like flowers after a storm, blooming in the sunshine and bursting with life. Trying to keep so many together was worse than herding cats - they kept being distracted by every little thing. There were so many little sticky fingers and scuffed knees and tantrums and *noise* … Keyleth loved kids, she did, but she also loved a bit of peace and quiet. How did parents and teachers do this *all* day *every* day? Children had *no* sense of self-preservation.

Percy, mister solitude-is-my-only-companion, however, was clearly having the time of his life. He was just as bad as the kids, really, seeming to be everywhere at once. He invented games, like let-Grog-pick-you-up-and-swirl-you-around and guess-where-Vax-is-hiding-the-

coin and take-a-ride-on-Trinket and make-a-rhyme-with-Scanlan and make-Pike-glow-and-your-skinned-knee-disappears.

And he was *smiling*.

Percy didn't do that often, Keyleth knew. A smirk or a quick bark of a laugh, sure. But moments of true happiness were few and far between. There was a darkness to her friend, something evil in his past that had left a lasting mark on more than just his skin. But on rare occasions, his unblemished sunny self shone through the clouds. It warmed her heart to see.

"I didn't know Percy liked kids," Vex told Keyleth quietly. They were ostensibly the rearguard: Vax was somewhere up ahead, invisible despite the fairly open plain they were traversing. Scanlan and Pike were lost in the ocean of similarly-heighted heads in front of them. They were leading the chorus of one of Scanlan's few child-appropriate songs. Grog stood out like an island, two kids clambering up his back and two more hanging off his outstretched arms. Percy had a small elvish girl sitting on his shoulders. She had pulled off his glasses and had put them on her own face upside-down. The magnifying lenses made her eyes adorably large on her small face. He hadn't seemed to notice, too engrossed with something in his hands. A moment later, a carefully-folded paper crane was placed in a red-haired boy's grasp, to the amazement of his friends. Percy laughed, then pulled another scrap of something out of his pockets to make another toy. This one was traded with a tiefling girl for a flower crown, which was worn with pride.

"Have we *ever* seen him this happy?" Keyleth asked. "I don't think I've ever heard him laugh properly before. A chuckle, sure. A sarcastic huff, all the time, but…"

Ahead, Percy had finally realized his glasses were missing, and was now in a faux battle against three children to regain them. He ended up flat on his back, a puppy-pile of kids on top of him. Scanlan eventually had to use his magic hand to rescue him. Sitting there on the grass, his glasses askew and his hair filled with blossoms, hooting with mirth… he looked *young*. Not the white-haired brooding shadow with worry lines as deep as wrinkles that they all knew and loved, but someone *softer*. With fewer cares and more joy. Now that Keyleth knew this Percy existed, she wanted to give him every opportunity to flourish.

Percy sidled up next to her a while later. "Do me a favor?"

"Of course!" Anything to make her feel even the slightest bit less useless.

"Marlo here has a question about your antlers," he jostled the boy currently sitting on his shoulders good-naturedly. Keyleth recognized him from his dark curly hair - he'd been chained to the Dread Emperor during that awful fight. She could have killed him. She immediately felt sick.

"Aretheyreal?" Marlo gushed all at once.

"Sorry?" She wanted to be anywhere but here. She was a danger and she was going to ruin everything *again* and gods…

"Hey," Percy laid a hand on her shoulder. "Talk to me. What's this?"

He held up a *Matthiola incana.* It smelled wonderful, and she told him as much.

“Good. And this one?” he pointed to a daffodil in his somewhat bedraggled flower crown. He kept up the game until her thoughts weren’t running quite so rampant.

“See, Marlo, I told you she was good with flowers,” Percy said. “Try asking your question again, a bit slower this time, if you would be so kind.”

“Are your antlers real?”

Oh. Keyleth self-consciously touched one of the points of her crown. It weighed heavier now that she remembered it was there, what it represented. She was training to be a *leader*, gods, what a joke.

“Keyleth?”

Right. She was supposed to be answering a simple question, not relapsing into another panic attack.

“They’re real,” she blurted. “But they aren’t mine, I mean, they *are*, I own them, or rather, they were entrusted to me, but I didn’t *grow* them myself or anything, they aren’t *attached*, I can take it off, see…” she lifted her crown, just a bit for illustration, before hastily putting it back. With how clumsy she was, she was slightly surprised she hadn't dropped it and broke the priceless holy relic of her people.

“*Cool*,” Marlo crowed. “Sylia, check this out!”

Soon Keyleth was surrounded by curious children. Percy stayed by her side, gently coaching her to grow more flowers on demand and summon some friendly squirrels and generally *play* with the kids instead of completely losing her shit. Since he was there, calm and collected and patient and ever-so-polite, the kids didn’t seem nearly so frightened of her either. He really was the absolute best of friends.

The townsfolk were overjoyed to have their children returned, of course. Percy smiled and bid each one goodbye personally. All of them left with some small token or toy made on the road. With each one that went back inside to the safety of their home, something about the gunslinger grew colder. Sadder. It was if the light had been sucked out of him just as surely as the setting sun. The rest of Vox Machina made their way to a tavern, but Percy insisted he had one more errand to do before turning in for the night.

When Keyleth asked, he confided that he needed to talk with the parents of the dead child. The one she’d killed. He was very kind about how he broke the news, and insisted that he could take care of it himself if she didn’t want to be involved.

She didn’t. But she also had to be. That was part of being a leader, right? The leader she was supposed to be someday? She didn’t know how she was going to look a mother in the eye and tell her she killed her precious child (she probably wouldn’t, *couldn’t,* because she was a coward as well as incompetent) especially since (to her continuing and utter shame) she

didn't even know his *name*. But she had to try. Percy was her best friend. She trusted that he had a plan, that he would stand by her side and make up for all her inadequacies. If Percy was willing to do this alone, she could certainly try to take responsibility for her actions with his help.

The house was rather small, and clean in the way only dirt-poor pride could make it. Percy stopped at the bottom of the steps to pull out a horribly small bundle from the Bag of Colding. It had been wrapped in the same fabric Keyleth knew he sewed his spare shirts out of. It was fine stuff, probably more expensive than anything the boy had ever worn while he was alive.

Keyleth knocked at the door and then stepped aside so Percy could come forward. Her hand shook horribly, but Percy's were full of something even more horrible.

"Mrs. Oldenmier?" Percy called. How he'd learned the name was a complete mystery, but she didn't doubt it was correct. Percy was *particular* with names, perhaps because his own was so complicated.

The woman who answered the door was about a decade older than Keyleth. She had the soap-chapped hands of a washerwoman, and the tired eyes of an overworked and overwrought mother.

She saw what Percy was carrying immediately, of course. She fell to her knees with a gasp. Percy knelt next to her, and shifted his burden until he could wrap an arm around her shoulders. To Keyleth's surprise, he didn't say anything. No platitudes, no fancy aristocratic nonsense. Just silence. Somehow, that was more profound than any words.

Keyleth, of course, just stood there like an idiot, feeling foolish and awful and guilty all at once.

Eventually, Mrs. Oldenmier's sobbing slowed. Percy offered her his silk handkerchief. Of course he did. He was a gentleman to the last.

"Do you have anyone who can be with you tonight?"

"My sister lives next door."

Percy looked at Keyleth. Right. Sister. Next door. She could do this. Probably. She could do *something* to help, at the very least.

She broke the news in a haze of anxiety. By the time she came back with one Mrs. Karly Beckwand (she paid attention because Percy was particular about names, and he would want to know), the boy's body was laid out on the kitchen table. Several other children hovered near the doorway. His siblings, no doubt. She'd killed their brother. *Gods*, could this situation get any worse?

The two adult sisters rushed to comfort each other. Keyleth stood in the doorway. Awkwardly. Could she do *nothing* right? She'd made a mistake in coming. She'd done

nothing but make mistakes ever since leaving Zephera. She *was* a living embodiment of a mistake.

“What is that on the table?” one of the children asked.

The youngest was already crying, picking up on the distress in the room. The oldest looked about a second from bursting into tears themselves because they *knew* what death was. But the middle one didn’t understand what was happening.

Thanks, gods, for making this worse.

Keyleth opened her mouth, but couldn’t say anything. What was there to say? *Hi, I’m Keyleth, I snapped your brother’s neck because I’m incapable of controlling my powers. He is never coming back to play with you, and you’ll carry this grief forever and it’s all my fault. So sorry, have a nice life, you’ll probably never see me again.*

Percy moved to the other children and knelt so he was at their eye level.

“Your brother is dead. That is his body.” Percy said frankly, but gently. He paused, making space for a question that never came. “He was very brave, and he loved you very much.”

It was strange, hearing Percy say such emotionally-laden words in such a soft tone. It was so different from his imperious lecturing, or his battlefield orders, or his aggrieved muttering when one of his devices wasn’t working right. Keyleth wasn’t quite sure what to make of it.

“Then why did he go away?”

“He didn’t have a choice,” Percy said in that same odd yet sympathetic voice. “The next few days might be different than usual for you as your family and friends honor his life. You might feel a lot of really strong emotions, or you might feel nothing at all. That’s ok. What’s important is that you stay close to each other and do whatever your mother asks. She needs your support just as much as you’ll need each other’s support. Ask for help if you need it, and give your help if it’s asked for. Can you do that for him?”

The children nodded. Percy stood to leave.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Oldenmier called before he could make it more than a few steps. “Thank you for bringing him home.”

“Don’t thank us,” Keyleth blurted, far too loudly. “Please don’t. I *failed* you. We didn’t bring *him* home. We brought his *corpse*. It’s my fault. You should hate me.”

Percy put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed tight, silencing her as well as protecting her from whatever was about to happen next. Mrs. Beckwand ushered the living children into another room. Mrs. Oldenmier stared at her, hard and piercing. Keyleth held her gaze as long as she could, which honestly wasn’t very long, and then hung her head in shame.

“One, don’t presume other’s feelings, it’s rude. Two, you’re young, so you’ve not learned this yet. Tragedy is rarely a single person’s fault. Mistakes tend to compound. Tell me true - is that what happened here?”

"*Yes*," Percy's tone brooked no argument, clearly telling this to both of them. "Keyleth only tried to help."

"There are worse crimes," Mrs. Oldenmier said sagely as she looked between them. It was obvious that she knew something more was going on, but she wasn't going to press because ultimately, it didn't matter. Her son was still dead. It wasn't like she had any capabilities to make them pay for that, even if she (rightfully) wanted to. "You brought the other children home safely, I presume?" They nodded. "You know, no other professional adventurers would even try to look for them, much less bring *all* of them home. When he was missing... sometimes hope hurts worse." She looked at the table and the body on it, took a shuddering breath, and dabbed her eyes brusquely with Percy's handkerchief. "At least… at least we know, now. We can bury him with family. It's a kindness most wouldn't think of, and I *do* thank you for that."

Percy's hand on Keyleth's shoulder squeezed to the point of almost being painful. "I know what it's like to not have closure," he said, his voice suddenly gravelly. "*You*, at least, can lay Oliver to rest knowing that the monster truly responsible for his death is dead."

Oliver. The child she'd killed was named *Oliver*.

Of course Percy would know. Percy was *particular* with names. But how he said this one was... different. Like it was familiar on his tongue. Like how the kids were familiar in his arms earlier. Like how he was familiar with what it felt like when a child died in your hands.

Everything was too much all at once, and Keyleth fled out the door so she could be sick in the alley. Percy wasn't far behind. He held her hair as she retched, because he was the best person on the planet.

Percy sat in the darkest corner of the tavern's main room with his glass of wine (on the house since they'd saved the barkeep's nephew), and stared at nothing. Keyleth came with two plates: one with roasted potato wedges, the other with a sandwich. After everything, she didn't particularly want to eat anything, but if she didn't eat Percy wouldn't either, and he needed to have something besides alcohol in his stomach.

"I like my mustard on the side, but feel free to dump it all over if you want," Keyleth said as she sat down the plate. "And no tomato on the sandwich, because I could smell them going bad even from the bar." He startled just a bit at the sound of her voice. She was used to the overreaction and didn't take it personally. Most things startled Percy when he was lost in that big brain of his.

"Thanks Keyleth," he said quietly. He grudgingly picked up the smallest potato wedge and took an unenthusiastic bite. She was proud of that tiny accomplishment. Until recently, he'd refused to eat anything with his fingers. Something about propriety and standards and hygiene.

They sat in silence for a bit, half-heartedly pecking at the food. What was there to say, really? It felt like a betrayal of Oliver's memory, to eat with her friend and *live* when that little boy would never do either of those things again.

“The kids loved you,” Percy said out of nowhere. Keyleth almost dropped her water glass in shock.

“Those kids were *terrified* of me, and rightfully so,” she shot back. “They were enamored with *you*.”

“You sell yourself short. Marlo wouldn’t stop talking about you even before you grew him that crown to match yours.”

“And you sell yourself short. You had the prince following orders within a minute of talking with him, and all the other little ones followed suit. They couldn’t have been more entranced if you’d used a spell.”

“They’ll forget me soon enough,” Percy said without bitterness. He took a sip of his wine.

“No they won’t,” Keyleth insisted. “You *rescued* them. They were scared and alone and you brought them back to their families. You’re a hero, and they’ll remember, I promise.” *She* certainly wouldn’t forget.

He didn’t say anything to that. But he did take a proper bite of his half of the sandwich. Even if it was only to have the excuse of having something in his mouth so he couldn’t reply, Keyleth counted it as a win. She might not be able to help him sleep, but she usually could get him to eat.

“You seemed to really get along well with Marie,” she said after a few more bites. “I admit I was a bit surprised: you’re not exactly social with adults.”

“Mari*a*, and I’m not,” he admitted with a bit of a smirk. It was nothing compared to the full-faced smiles of earlier, but it was better than the gloom they’d been cultivating since separating from the main group. “I find trusting people, especially strangers… difficult. But with children… They’re innocent. Their trust is given so freely,” something about his words made his expression go dark again, “however unwise that may be.”

“I’m glad we were able to be worthy of that trust,” Keyleth said, hoping to nudge the conversation towards safer paths. “How’d you get to be so good with kids anyway?”

“Younger siblings will give you plenty of practice.”

This was previously unknown and completely unforeseen information. Percy Did Not Talk About His Past. *Ever.* Even to Keyleth. She knew that just because he was her best friend didn’t mean that she was his. Even if she was he didn’t owe her anything. But still. It hurt, sometimes, that he didn’t trust her with that part of his life.

“So you’re the eldest?” she asked eagerly before she could reconsider her words.

That was, apparently, the wrong thing to say. Percy tilted his head so that the reflection on his glasses obscured his eyes, and gripped the stem of his wine hard enough that she feared it might break. He opened his mouth as if to speak, thought better of it, then abruptly stood and left. Keyleth knew he was headed directly to his room, and would not be open to discussion

for the rest of the day, possibly for several days. Previous experience meant that she knew pushing him would only make it worse, so she let him go. The least she could do after everything he'd done for her was give him some small measure of private peace.

Chapter End Notes

Originally, this was much more lighthearted. (A low bar in retrospect, I know.) And then I learned that the plot I'd planned was super similar to one of Vox Machina's pre-stream adventures. So I adapted what I had to better fit with what little we know of canon. Along the way, Keyleth decided to dump a whole pile of angst, and Percy (of course) added some more, because that's just what he does.

Also, if you didn't know, one of Percy's younger brothers was named Oliver. We don't know exactly how he died in the livestream but it was during/soon after the Briarwood takeover.

Sometimes the people who give the best advice are the absolute worst at heeding it. Percy has a lot of experience with grief, and is smart enough to know how he should be handling it, and has made the executive decision not to. This is also a somewhat different situation than the Briarwoods, because the villain has been vanquished - therefore vengeance has been satisfied.

I also have a special interest in death rituals, so I know more than I probably should about best practices for talking to kids about death. We all have to deal with death in our lives - ignoring that reality doesn't help anyone. PSA: check out the Order of the Good Death and/or TalkDeath.

I headcannon dad!Percy so hard. And I also maintain that part of the reason Vex started to fall for Percy was that she saw his father potential long before they ever kissed.

Seriously, my sister is awesome for letting me post her art. Give her some love in the comments - she deserves it!

Chapter 8: Vex - Month 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vex'ahlia learned that Percy didn't know... well, let's walk through it, shall we darling?

“How’s our resident pied piper?” Scanlan asked when Keyleth returned to the rest of Vox Machina. She looked like she’d been through the wringer, probably because she had. There was a wilted flower tucked behind one ear, and a bit of mustard clinging to the corner of her mouth. Vex reached out and thumbed it away. Keyleth leaned into her touch, and soon she had a lapful of weeping druid.

She forgot, sometimes, just how young Keyleth was. How little experience she had with the world. Vex didn’t think she’d personally ever been so soft, so kind, so gullible. Part of her hated Keyleth’s tenderness, and part of her wanted to protect it with everything she had. She knew Keyleth was more than capable of protecting herself physically - her command over the elements was impressive as it was terrifying - but her heart was another matter entirely. Vax was exactly the same way; brilliant with his knives, an absolute idiot in his relationships. Of course the two of them had got the *fantastic* idea of making eyes at each other. *That* was going to go down in flames, mark her words.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

Keyleth told them what Percy had done for Mrs. Oldenmier and her surviving kids. What he’d said to Keyleth in the mansion library, at the dinner table just now. After her confession, everyone stayed quiet for a long time, even Scanlan and Grog, miracle of miracles.

Vax broke the stunned silence by blurting, “He’s not the eldest.”

Vex raised her eyebrow. Vax just shook his head. “Don’t ask how I know - it’s not my story to tell. But he had an older brother.”

A *protective* one, Vax didn’t say, but Vex knew her brother well enough to hear the words anyway. That made sense - she saw how Percy tended to gravitate towards Grog’s reassuring bulk anytime he’d been spooked.

“He’s not the second-eldest either,” Scanlan added, looking stricken. It was an odd look on the usually jovial and irreverent bard. “He had an older sister too - he accompanied her violin on his piano.”

Which would explain the melancholy look Percy always got when Scanlan played that particular instrument. And potentially why Scanlan trusted him to repair his instruments when they inevitably got damaged in a fight.

“Percy said younger *siblings*,” Vex looked to Keyleth for confirmation. She nodded. “That means more than one. That makes at minimum four - more likely five or six - total. Aristocratic families, especially human aristocratic families, tend to run large.”

And now Percy was alone. No one said it, but they were all thinking it.

"I know. I've… I know what it's like. To feel them die."

Vex knew Percy well enough to imagine how he would pause so his voice wouldn't crack. How he'd stop mid-sentence to rephrase what he wanted to say *just so*. How he'd misdirect attention away from the tremble in his hands with a monotone delivery and a quick change of topic. Vex knew his masks, knew how desperately he clung to them. She clung to her own masks just as desperately.

For a wretched moment, Vex contemplated a world where she'd watched Vax die. Her breath caught with the absolute *agony* of merely thinking about it. How could she possibly survive that? What *wouldn't* she be capable of if she did? For a moment, all she could think of was the image of a trapped animal gnawing off its own leg. Suddenly a lot of things about Percy made horrible, horrible sense.

"I said it before and I'll say it again - you don't make a weapon like Percy's unless there's a damn good reason," Vax said, saving her from further hypothetical hells. "That kind of brutality only comes from someone who's been betrayed by someone they trust. I've seen it before."

No one asked where, thankfully. No one was particularly chatty about their backstories in this group, and for good reason. But even they weren't immune to some gossip and guesswork. And Percy was too tempting of a puzzle to pass up.

In for a copper, in for a gold. "There are names. On his pepperbox," Vex revealed. "Five of them. It's in that really fine engraving he prefers so it's hard to see unless you're right on top of it and the lighting is right." She would have probably missed them entirely if the callouses on her fingers hadn't caught on the texture when she picked the pepperbox up off the ship deck after that ambush. If she'd been smart, she would have inspected them further, remembered the names, but between Percy maybe dying of hypothermia and the ship possibly running aground she hadn't had the time. "But they're there. They aren't his family - the last names were all different."

"Revenge is a damn good reason," Grog spoke up. Everyone turned to look at him. "What? It *is.* And if I had that many people that needed revengin' on, I'd make a list of them too so I wouldn't forget none. If I could write, ya know. 'N' if you put it on yer weapon it's not like it's gonna get lost or damaged like a bitty piece of paper. That's convenient and logical, like. Poetical too."

"It *would* be a very Percy thing to do," Vax agreed. "I know he put the name of someone on that filleting knife he uses, though I think that was for more sentimental reasons. So there's a precedent."

Pike summarized the conversation so far. "So… Percy was a noble, and then some people - five people, if Grog's theory is correct - came and tortured him and his, what did you say Vex? Maybe *six* siblings? Birth control charms exist, people. Why would they do that? The torturing kids, for fuck's sake Scanlan, not the procreation."

"Coup, most likely," their bard shrugged. "Power and wealth are powerful motivators. It happens more than the nobility would like to think. And some people are sadistic monsters

who like to hear people scream."

"Whatever happened or why, Percy escaped, obviously. But then what?"

Vax stole Vex's ale and drank the last of it. Jerk. "If I were a noble on the run from a bunch of sadistic fucks, do you know what I'd do?"

Grog raised his hand. "Stab 'em inna face?"

"And assuming I had no weapons and no allies and was beat to hell," Vax clarified.

"You'd get the fuck out of there," Vex answered the original hypothetical. Not all that hypothetical, in their case. Syldor hadn't physically tortured them (unless school counted, which it kind of did) but he'd been a sadistic fuck nonetheless. Vax had all been for escaping from almost the moment they'd arrived - Vex made him wait until they had the training and the tools to survive on their own. When they fled, they'd had weapons and healing potions and gear, and most importantly, each other. Even then, staying alive had proven nearly impossible. But Percy hadn't had *anything*. He'd been alone, and hurt, without resources, without allies, without knowledge.

How in the nine hells had he managed?

"I'd get the fuck out of there," Vax echoed. "Teleporting would have been out of the question - mages that powerful are expensive, and if he'd used one they would have healed up his wounds so he wouldn't have the scars he has now. Walking or riding wouldn't work - it would hurt like hell after being tortured, and would be too slow to boot. That leaves boats. Passage is fairly cheap - plenty of captains will let you ride in exchange for labor. The ocean is a big place to hide. And we know Percy is proficient in sailing and fishing."

Pike thumbed her amulet. "So he laid low at sea for a while. Makes sense. But how on earth did he end up in a prison in the Umbra Hills? That's deep inland."

"He caught scent of his prey," Vex spoke before she'd finished thinking about it, but she *knew* she was right. "Percy wouldn't have been able to make his pepperbox on a boat. He'd need a fairly specialized workspace for that. A well-stocked forge means a large town. A large town means rumors, and intel. He must have heard one of the names from his revenge list and tracked them across the continent."

"If it took him that long he must have been really bad at it," Grog huffed derisively.

"Probably," Vex shrugged. "He's not shown any particular skill at woodcraft or interrogation. Travel isn't cheap either, and he has absolutely no common sense when it comes to money. He would have had to pick up jobs along the way, which would cause delays. If his target was on a horse and he was on foot, it would take even longer to catch up."

"He *did* catch up," Scanlan said. "That was why he was in prison. Attempted murder, I think the guard said."

“He *missed*,” Vex induced. Percy had fantastic aim - they all knew that. Maybe even better than her, though she’d never admit to that. She’d never seen his hands shake during combat, no matter how chaotic or dire. But facing down your family’s murderer would make anyone tremble. “He missed his shot and was caught.”

“So why is he sticking with us instead of going back to finish the job?” Vax asked. He had his dagger out - ostensibly to trim his nails, but Vex knew it was because he always felt calmer with a weapon in his hands. This conversation was hitting him hard. Was hitting *all* of them hard, Vex realized. Grog kept flexing his biceps like he was holding back a rage, and Keyleth kept breaking out in patches of fur and feathers like she was trying not to wildshape. Pike had a death grip on her amulet, and Scanlan was acting like the polar opposite of his carefree self. Vex purposefully relaxed her tense muscles so she could properly drape herself across her chair. They probably knew her well enough to see through her mask, but on the off chance they didn’t, she preferred to keep her emotions to herself.

What those emotions *were*, exactly, well. She didn’t have the time to think about that right now.

“Prison gives you a lot of time to think about what you’re doing with your life.” Pike spoke up. “He’s not stupid, by any stretch. He just needed an opportunity to reconsider things, to find another way. He told me that us rescuing him was the first time one of his prayers had been answered. Maybe he believes that we’ll lead him where he needs to go.”

That seemed a bit optimistic, honestly, but Vex wasn’t going to argue. Pike always saw the best in people. Vex often looked for the worst. Revenge might not be the smartest or healthiest path, but it was a powerful motivator. Percy certainly had the will and the motive and the means to follow through, no matter how long it might take. No matter what it might cost.

Scanlan clapped his hands together brusquely. “In conclusion, we’ve collectively picked the lock on his super-traumatic backstory. That he clearly wanted to keep secret and doesn’t know we now know about. Now what are we going to do about it? We can’t just pass him the milk tomorrow morning over breakfast and go, ‘So Perce, tell us more about your quest for vengeance for your murdered family’. I mean, we *could*, I suppose, but I’d rather not play with the business end of his pepperbox.”

“He’d more likely just spook and run than shoot you,” Vex chewed her lip in lieu of playing with her feathers. That particular nervous tic was too well known. “Which doesn’t help him and it doesn’t help us.”

“Percy don’t run from nothin’,” Grog crossed his arms. You could see his pulse in the bulging veins of his biceps. It was sort of sweet to see the goliath leap to the defense of Percy’s honor. “He’s bitty, but he ain’t a coward.”

“I won’t argue that he stands his ground when it’s a physical fight,” Vex clarified. *Even when he probably shouldn’t.* “But when it comes to an emotional discussion? At best, he’ll deflect. If you corner him, he’ll lock down tighter than Tal’Dorei’s vault.” Which was another point in favor of Vax’s theory that he’d been betrayed by someone close to him, come to think of it.

“How many times have we asked a question, only to have him just walk away in lieu of a proper answer?”

Everyone looked sideways at each other. They’d all had the pleasure of that particular interaction.

Vax had moved on from picking his fingernails to carving dirty doodles into the already pockmarked tabletop with his dagger. Vex snatched it away, only for him to recall it to his blinkback belt. A moment later it was back in his hand. Asshole. “We should just do what we’ve been doing - not talking about it,” he said. “Percy’s business is his own. We’ve pried enough as it is. Voyeurism might be your thing, Scanlan, but it’s not mine.”

“Bullshit,” Scanlan retorted. “You’re a rogue. Prying into people’s dirty secrets is your *entire* thing.”

The gnome had a point, Vex had to admit. But something about this felt *different* than poking around a mark’s house in search of valuables. Perhaps it was because she actually knew Percy. Perhaps it was because, despite herself, she was starting to *care* about him.

“We’re going to have to deal with this sooner or later,” Scanlan’s voice sobered. “This isn’t the first time I’ve heard this song and seen this dance. Either Percy is going to go off on his own to enact his revenge, or the people who hurt him are going to find him first. Either way, it’s gonna get real ugly, and we’re going to be caught right in the middle of it.”

“He’s my best friend,” Keyleth spoke up for the first time since they’d started over-analyzing Percy. Her voice was watery, but determined. “He’s always been there for me, for us. We owe it to him to do the same.”

“If he asks for help, I’ll gladly give it.” Pike thumbed her amulet. It was glowing, ever-so-slightly. Vex doubted she even noticed. Either she was unconsciously calling on her god for help, or Sarenrae approved of the direction of this conversation. “I told him as much at the start and I meant it then and I mean it now. He doesn’t have faith in gods, but I think he is starting to have faith in us. I’d like to live up to that, if I can.”

“We’re Percy’s herd,” Grog said, nodding firmly. “We protect our own. And bullies who torture people and kill kids need dealt with. Permanent-like.”

Vex looked at her brother. He had his face turned, making him difficult to read. But his knife was in his hands, reversed, like he was preparing to fight. When he spoke, his words were measured and sincere. He always did wear his heart on his sleeve, despite the shadows he tried to hide himself in.

“I might not particularly like him, and I certainly don’t fully trust him, but… Freddie’s a good man, I think, despite the stick in his ass. I don’t know what kind of crap he got up to as a noble, but I doubt he deserved what happened to him, and his younger siblings certainly didn’t. We’ve taken bounties for less. Killed people for less.” The tension in his shoulders released, and Vax broke out into an entirely inappropriate grin. “Besides, if he’s noble, and he most certainly is, that means *somewhere* he’s got a fancy house and a pile of gold. The reward should be more than enough for your hoard, Stubby.”

She'd not even considered that angle, but… he wasn't wrong. Not why her fingers itched for her sharpest arrow every time she thought of *some rank piece of shit* digging knives into Percy's skin, but a believable enough excuse for everyone else.

Vex kept her tone flippant, her manner carefree. "You know me too well, Scrawny. I'm going to look *fabulous* in gemstones and silk, just you wait."

"I guess we're doing this then," Scanlan sighed. "We're *so* fucked."

The next morning, things were a lot less awkward than Vex feared they might be.

Scanlan passed the milk without comment, rude or lewd or otherwise. Despite the bruise-dark circles under Percy's eyes, he ate a full plate for breakfast at Keyleth's urging. He was starting to put some actual flesh on his emaciated bones, courtesy of the Druid's unending efforts to get him to eat on a semi-regular basis. The extra weight looked good on him. *Really* good, actually. Bulked out his shoulders nicely, filled in the curve of his ass… Vex turned back to her own eggs before her observations turned to outright fantasies. *Someone* in this gods-blasted party had to be professional, and it certainly wasn't going to be Scanlan.

Or her brother. She rolled her eyes as he dumped a fistfull of lint and metal shavings next to her plate, the bounty from his attempt at picking Percy's pocket for reasons only known to Vax.

"You *know* I carry all his cash," she said. That particular habit was as endearing as it was strange. Did he really care so little for money, or did he truly trust her that much? He absolutely insisted on it, though Percy wouldn't give a straight answer on his reasons why.

Vax pouted. "Yeah, but he usually has all sorts of fun stuff squirreled away."

"By *fun,* I assume you mean 'sharp and/or explosive'?"

"Obviously."

Percy perked up, clearly overhearing their conversation.

"I have *just* the thing for you Vax," he grinned. An actual, proper, full-teeth grin. It made him look approximately a decade younger and was cute as hell. "Hold out your hand, palm up and pointer finger out, and close your eyes."

Vax looked suspicious, but complied.

Percy pulled a rather elegantly carved raven from one of his less-accessible pockets. It was clearly a child's toy. A very *young* child's toy. He carefully balanced it on Vax's outstretched finger on its beak.

"I thought this might be appropriate for your intellect," Percy said guilelessly. Vax opened his eyes, then his mouth, but he didn't say anything. As he moved, the outstretched wings kept the toy balanced in place.

It *was* rather clever, Vex had to admit. Not only had it shut up her brother, but it guaranteed at least one of his hands would be occupied for the foreseeable future.

“That’s so cool!” Keyleth pressed close, leaning over Vax’s shoulder so she could see. “You even carved all the vanes in the feathers.”

So he had. The bird was absolutely covered in extraordinarily fine etching, the same as what Vex had seen on his pepperbox and some of his knives. It must have taken him ages. Come to think of it, it was probably what he’d been up to when he couldn’t sleep. Between his hunched back and his cupped hands, she’d not been able to properly see his latest project, but she could hear the tell-tale scratching and under-the-breath swearing while she was on watch.

Percy sat back, the smile a little less teasing and a lot more satisfied. A cat who had got the cream, eaten it, and was enjoying the after-dinner glow. The air of pleased contentedness shattered when a random person jostled his chair as they passed. He didn’t react, as such. Vex would have never noticed if she hadn’t already been paying attention. But the smile grew forced, and his blinking increased as his pupils dilated. His hand went to his pepperbox.

Grog stepped up behind Percy, a solid wall of muscle and potential rage between him and the rest of the tavern. Just as quickly as Percy had tensed, he relaxed. Grog put a hand on his shoulder; Percy took a visible deep breath. His ricktus grin turned a soft around the edges, and he relinquished his grip on his pepperbox. Grog stayed there, casual as could be, making conversation with the others and stealing Keyleth’s unattended toast, until Percy finished his breakfast and made to stand up. Even then, Grog stayed just behind his shoulder like a bodyguard until they were out of the tavern.

Interesting.

What was even more interesting was that Vex had seen that interaction a dozen or so times before, and had thought nothing of it. But with all the revelations from last night it took on a deeper meaning. Whether either of them realized it or not, Grog had his back, and Percy trusted him with it.

The weather was actually nice, for once, and they weren’t in a particular rush. Percy walked with Keyleth, who was still subdued after the events of the last few days. After a few hours, he had her laughing again. Vax joined them, the raven toy still perched on his pointer finger and one of his throwing daggers balanced on the other. Every now and again, he’d flip the two high in the air and catch them on opposite hands. Scanlan noticed, and started playing a jaunty tune in accompaniment. A few moments later, Percy started to sing the harmony. He really did have a pleasant voice, even if it was a bit smokier than one would expect from someone his age. Keyleth became Minxie, and started walking on her hind legs and doing other various tricks. Vax (after asking permission) jumped up on her shoulders and started doing his knife tricks from there.

Vex rolled her eyes. Despite how they often acted, Vox Machina wasn’t a circus! Though… the payout might be better, and the risks would certainly be less. Definitely something to contemplate.

She was halfway through her mental cost-benefit analysis when Trinket growled at something in the trees. Vex's hands immediately went for her bow. Trinket was her best boy, and she trusted his judgment. If he was growling, there was something worth growling at.

Percy, despite being ostensibly involved in the increasingly-daring juggling act, noticed Trinket's unease too. It surprised her, how well he got along with her bear, almost from day one. Unlike *some* members of the party she could name, Percy spent time getting to actually know Trinket, whether that was walking at his side, giving him a good scratch, or sharing some of his food. She'd caught him talking to Trinket in the wee hours of the morning more than once. He'd even made a robust brush to help with the never-ending job of keeping Trinket well-groomed which worked wonders.

Percy pulled away from the others, hand on pepperbox and eyes sharp. He opened his mouth to tell the others to *shut up* when he was rudely interrupted by a fireball to the chest.

Vex tracked the trajectory backward and sent an arrow hissing after the caster. Soon spells and various sharp projectiles were flying thickly through the air. Grog yelled, Scanlan shrieked, Pike prayed, Minxie growled, Trinket roared, the bandits screamed, and over all their cacophony boomed the steady *bang-bang-bang* of Percy's pepperbox.

Vex pulled out of melee range, ending up across the road from Percy so they could catch the bandits in their crossfire. His shirt was a scorched mess, and his cravat was badly singed, but otherwise he looked fine. When this was over, he was likely going to be more upset about his destroyed wardrobe than the actual attack. Vex ran some quick calculations and decided they could splurge on the good silk for replacements.

Everything was going as well as it reasonably could in a situation like this - they were *good* at their jobs, and while these bandits were a cut above the usual gutter lowlifes they weren't going to last much longer.

"On your left," Percy said as calmly as one could when projecting their voice across a skirmish. His tone implied that he was pointing out where the sugar was on the tea tray. Immediately, Vex threw her elbow back, catching the bandit sneaking up on her squarely in the solar plexus. Once on the ground, Trinket finished him off. Percy then stepped deliberately to the side so he could get a better shot at a dagger-wielding rogue aiming at Pike. Moving that way revealed a pissed-looking barbarian about to swing at his back, who Vex promptly shot in the throat.

At the time, she thought nothing of the interaction. It was the same bloody dance they'd mastered since the very first battle they'd fought. But later that night, as she watched him clean his weapon, she realized that it meant that Percy had turned his back on a known and immediate threat (that barbarian had been yodeling fit to rival Grog, and while Percy's hearing wasn't great, he wasn't *deaf*), trusting that Vex would protect him. It also meant he trusted her to take care of herself - it would have been easy for him to shoot the bandit sneaking up on her, but instead, he'd chosen to let her deal with it in whatever way she deemed best. Vex didn't doubt that he'd take a blow for her - he had, several times. But unlike her idiot brother, throwing himself bodily between her and danger wasn't Percy's first instinct. Letting her handle things *was*.

Damn it all if his respect wasn’t sexy as hell.

After finishing his weapon maintenance, Percy went over to sit next to Pike. Vex was ostensibly on watch, but so was Trinket, so she didn't feel bad for reading their lips from across the campsite.

"Did you sleep at all last night?" Pike asked. Percy's smile was more like a wince. The dark circles under his eyes, as well as the tired slope of his shoulders, were answer enough. Pike gave him a sympathetic smile and a soft pat on his knee. "Help me get set up?" Percy nodded, then started to fish around in one of Pike's packs. Soon they'd pieced together a small camp shrine to Sarenrae.

Pike settled down in front of it, Percy a respectful distance away. She started her usual chants, moving her hands in the prescribed motions. Percy watched her fingers weave through the incense smoke, the mesmerizing movements slowly tempting his eyes closed. Pike eventually fell silent and just *breathed*, steady and deep as she communed with her goddess. Percy's respirations slowed to match hers. Weight seemed to melt from his tense posture. Then he seemed to melt himself, head nodding down and spine slumping to the side. Before he could fall over, Pike was there, easing him down into his bedroll.

Vex had seen them do this before, in bits and pieces, but never from start to finish. She knew Percy didn't worship Sarenrae or any other god for that matter. But something about watching Pike go through her nightly rituals made him more likely to fall asleep, and more likely to *stay* asleep. Judging from Pike's responses, she'd picked up on the pattern too.

As she turned her gaze back to the woods (where it rightfully should have been) she realized something rather obvious. Vox Machina, each and every one of them, looked after Percy in their own individual ways. They'd declared it with their words last night, but Vex was of the opinion that their actions spoke louder. Crucially, however, she wasn't convinced that *Percy* knew that. His body language certainly was aware, but consciously? Sometimes his big brain got in his way.

Unfortunately, she was right. They were *all* right. It came out all at once, at the worst possible time. And somehow, the most painful part wasn't what Vox Machina already knew - that his family had been killed, that he'd been tortured and exiled from his home - but what *he* didn't. The absolutely gobsmacked look on Percy's face when everyone declared their unequivocal support was heartbreaking. Somehow, even after all they'd already been through, he honestly *didn't know* that they were there for him. That they all had his back. That they *cared*. Deeply. They wouldn't abandon him to the darkness that had marked him so profoundly.

Vex wouldn't leave Percy to face his worst fears alone. She'd just have to make sure he knew that too.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks all for sticking with this story till the end! Apologies for Vex: she *would not* come down from her tree or stop shooting at me long enough to get this chapter written. lol. What shook her loose was rewatching the following bit from the livestream (which is gold, go back and watch Taliesin's reactions):

> TALIESIN: You don't have to get involved in this.
> LAURA: Oh, we are *so* involved.
> TRAVIS: (laughing) Yeah, we do. You said you want them dead.
> LAURA: We've got your back, darling.
> LIAM: Percival, you don't really have a choice in the matter. My sister and I know a little piece of your pain. I'm not going to get into it, but there's nothing she and I can do. We can find reparations for you. We will.

This is not the reaction of a group of people who have suddenly been blindsided by the incredibly traumatic backstory of a person they don't really care about. We know that the actors obviously knew most of this already - Percy's character statement had been outlining it for over 20 episodes. But the *characters* are also speaking like they weren't surprised by this 'revelation'. Ergo, they've already figured it out and collectively made a decision about it. Ergo, there must be a story about how that happened. Cue plot bunnies.

I cannot tell you how much I've enjoyed writing this, posting this, and reading all of your feedback and reactions. You are all wonderful.

Thank you again to my wonderful sister for letting me use her art 💖

Works inspired by this one

[Restricted Work] by johnsmile

[Restricted Work] by Nenia458

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